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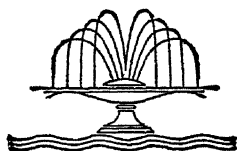
THREE FANTASTIC TALES
THE BEAST
THE MAN WHO COULD STILL LAUGH

PASSPORT TO PARADISE

by

CLAUDE HOUGHTON

"Illusion is the passport to paradise."



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1944



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1944

PROLOGUE, 1921

OLIVER MARKHAM CLEARS THE GROUND

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PROLOGUE, 1921

OLIVER MARKHAM CLEARS THE GROUND ,

I

OLIVER MARKHAM came to a standstill in his restless pacing of the room, then stared at the thick-pile carpet.

"God only knows what line she'll take."

As he started to stride to and fro again, he added :

"You never know with a woman. She might do anything."

He had enough to think about, enough to arrange, without this Flora business which he must settle to-day. It wasn't a pleasant job to tell a woman like Flora, whom he had kept for the last three years, that he was going to marry and that, therefore, their relationship must end ; but, pleasant or not, he had to do this and he had to do it to-day. If only he had not told her, again and again, that he would not marry ! He had encouraged her to believe that they would remain lovers—and now he had to leave her abruptly, brutally.

Again he came to a standstill but, this time, to seek distraction from a problem which became more formidable the more clearly he visualised it. Almost immediately, however, the contemplation of this large sitting-room with its new furniture created the requisite diversion.

He looked round with appraising satisfaction.

Oliver Markham was the osseous type : tall, with rather long arms, dark crinkly hair, and a somewhat swarthy complexion. Although he was only thirty-three, the aggressive features would have told the least observant that this man had entered the business arena early ; that he had fought hard and successfully. Unremitting concentration on one objective soon brands a face and Markham's was already branded. The prominent nose denoted initiative and a capacity for taking risks ; the compressed mouth suggested ruthlessness in a situation demanding it. But there is an alien feature in most faces, and the melancholy eyes certainly seemed incongruous to Markham's.

His scrutiny of the room continued to create satisfaction. He had taken this flat on the fifth floor of a recently-erected

luxury block, near Hyde Park Corner, a few months ago. It was expensive, but Markham welcomed every symbol of his success. The front rooms had an excellent view of the park—a fact which had not been omitted in assessing the rent. The furniture had been supplied by a famous London store. It was solid, sound, and had cost a considerable sum. It is true that individual pieces had an isolated air, as if they were waiting to be introduced, but Markham was unaware of it. His satisfaction was derived from the fact that his present surroundings were in total contrast to those of his childhood. And that was precisely what he wanted them to be.

His father, who had shipwrecked himself socially by marrying an uneducated Portuguese girl, had died when Oliver was two. For the next thirteen years his mother had run a cheap Soho restaurant, with varying fortunes. At the cost of great personal sacrifice, she gave Oliver something better than a Board School education—for which she received no gratitude at the time and none retrospectively. During his most receptive years he had seen Bohemian squalor at very close quarters and had conceived a passionate loathing for it—and for all foreigners, who were intimately associated with it.

With the death of his mother, when he was fifteen, his fortunes changed abruptly. A parental uncle—who had quarrelled with his brother when the latter married the obscure Portuguese girl—appeared from the void and took the fifteen-year-old Oliver into his care. He gave the boy two years' training in his office—inculcated his own methods—then started him in a big engineering firm of which he was chairman. Oliver did the rest. Money meant power—money meant worlds between him and Soho squalor. This incentive created drive, initiative, ruthlessness. He forged his way towards the top. Although he was only twenty-six when the 1914 war came, he held a pivotal post and so did not have to serve. As practically all his contemporaries were with the forces, he got a long start which he never lost. At the end of the war, he was in a commanding position and had made a considerable amount of money. He possessed every quality essential to commercial success: deep, driving energy; a flair for detecting dominant facts; concentration; a gift for selecting men.

He was thinking of his career now, as he stood looking

round the sitting-room, in much the same way as an officer would survey a position he had stormed and captured. Then, as a final reminder of his triumph, he went to the window, leaned out, and looked at a large car waiting in the forecourt.

Soon, however, he returned to restless pacing of the room.

"I must settle with Flora this afternoon!"

To-night Merle was dining with him and he must be free to urge her to marry him in the immediate future.

It was odd that he had met Merle only recently because he had known her father, Joyce, for some years. Their meetings had been infrequent, chiefly because Joyce was a "typical Irishman" who had an elusive personality and who indulged in intermittent drinking bouts, during which he was capable of almost everything. Markham had no objection to drinking—he was a fairly heavy drinker himself—but Joyce's orgies had a demoniac quality which put them outside all recognised limits.

His attraction to Merle, on their first meeting, had been so overwhelming that his determination to marry her was too deep to be deflected by considerations which might well have made a more adventurous man hesitate.

Merle was twenty-five. There are blondes about whom men make many confident sexual assumptions, and Merle was one of them. She had a hint of the *outré*, a spectacular quality, which does not invariably correspond with the certainty it creates. The short luxuriant hair occasionally looked untidy. Merle invariably wore black evening gowns which accentuated her figure and contrasted effectively with very white skin. At her worst, when she had drunk rather too much, she might have been mistaken for a super-barmaid who had married a rich man. But her worst occurred rarely.

Her eyes dominated her appearance. They were so large, so wide-open, so luminous, that their effect was to impair the balance of the face. These intensely grey eyes had no liaison with the other features, and this isolation suggested a deep division in her nature.

But the chief circumstance which might well have made a man hesitate to marry Merle was her unhappiness—an unhappiness nearly as old as herself—and one which had many causes. Probably the chief was the total incompatibility between her father and his wife, Agatha, who asked

only for an uneventful life. Why the lonely mercurial Joyce, who had many gifts and many thwarted desires, should have married Agatha is a mystery as impenetrable as that of life itself. To her, he was an endless series of shocks. It was like living on a giant racer. She found it impossible to believe that such a person could exist, and that she had married him. He was as incalculable as the movements of a snake.

During his drinking bouts Joyce created an atmosphere of such unreality that Agatha felt he was only pretending to be a husband and a father. A heavy drinker invariably suggests that, although he is present physically, the essential man is somewhere else and, in the case of Joyce, it was not easy to imagine where. He brought all sorts of disreputable people to his Highgate flat but, as he quickly tired of them, he often spent long periods alone or made frequent visits to unspecified haunts.

Inevitably, the children of such a marriage were unlikely to be normal or happy. Rows of peculiar intensity occurred regularly, as Joyce possessed the unique gift of striking sparks from the leaden Agatha. It is not surprising, therefore, that the children's one desire was to escape from home whenever possible.

The 1914 war gave Merle's twin brothers—who were two years younger than she was—their first chance of real deliverance and they both took it. And were both killed in France, in the same month, in 1918. At the end of the war Merle became engaged to an officer, though whether she loved him, or whether she regarded marriage as the only escape from home, was known only to her. In 1920, however, the officer died as the result of being gassed just before the armistice—and Merle attempted suicide by jumping from a fourth floor window of the Highgate flat.

When Markham reached this point in his review of Merle's past, he stopped near the mantelpiece.

That fourth floor window, in that Highgate block of flats! She had thrown herself from *there*. Whenever he went to see her, he stopped in the forecourt, looked up at that fourth floor window, then at the small flower-bed, surrounded by spikes, into which she had fallen. That flower-bed was the only one in the forecourt which, otherwise, consisted of concrete. To fall from that height, even on to a soft surface, without sustaining terrible injuries was a

miracle. He trembled whenever he looked from that window to that spike-ringed flower-bed.

"I must get her away from everything she's ever known—just as soon as I can."

Nevertheless, when he started to pace the room again, the disturbing thought haunted him that he would vehemently advise another man not to marry Merle. He could hear himself say: "Marry her? With that father—and that background? Marry a girl who's attempted suicide? Well, get on with it, if you want to. But don't whine when you take the rap. Because take it you will."

But apart from Merle's physical attraction, which in itself was powerful enough to rout all his logical objections, there was a more complex reason why he was determined to marry her. Normally, his pride refused to formulate this complex reason, but, now, he was confronted by a crisis—and a crisis frequently compels recognition of motives which are normally masked.

Markham had not married because his social ideal was such a complicated one that remarkably few women could have played the rôle of wife. He wanted the family life of an English gentleman, although he was forced to realise that by upbringing and temperament he was incapable of making this ideal a reality. This incapability, however, made him the more determined to present the façade of an English gentleman's home to the world—if he could find a woman who would look the part, and not be it. He knew perfectly well that a lady, in the traditional sense of the word, would be useless. He needed appearance, not reality.

This was the reason why he had told Flora that he would remain single. It was also the reason why he would not marry her. He would be perfectly happy with Flora, and he knew it, but to marry her would proclaim what he actually was—a lonely being, half a foreigner, who had hacked his way to success—and it would involve a final farewell to his "gentleman" dream. Markham was determined to be permanently dressed for a part he could not play. He needed therefore a wife to sustain a similar rôle. Merle, and only Merle, possessed the requisite qualifications.

She possessed them, because she was outside all social categories. *But* she had been well educated; she knew how to behave; her accent was faultless. She looked a

lady—possibly a slightly spectacular one—but a lady. And that was all Markham cared about.

He stopped by an armchair, flung himself down, then lit a cigarette.

To-night, Merle must fix the date of their wedding. Speed was essential because, although she had consented to marry him, she had told him that she did not love him. She had stressed that she did not love him. She was still half-dazed from the effects of attempted suicide, and her acceptance of him might be conditioned partly by that fact and partly by desperate determination to escape from home. It was imperative, therefore, not to give her time in which to think—imperative to sweep her into a totally new life.

It was also imperative to decide what he should tell her about himself. At present, she knew that he was an only child—that his parents were dead—that he had had a “difficult time” till he was fifteen—that he was rich. Merle, in short, knew no less and no more about him than her father, Joyce.

Well, was he going to supplement her knowledge?

He certainly would not tell her anything about Flora. That was certain. And he would not tell her that his mother had been Portuguese—or anything about that Soho restaurant. Of course he wouldn't! Only his uncle knew those facts, but he was old and his knowledge would die with him. And there was no need to tell her the kind of life he wanted to present to the world. He had already hinted at its nature and he would leave it at that.

He put his cigarette out with a decisive movement, then his thoughts reverted to the necessity for marrying Merle with the least delay possible. Once they were married, he would organise her life on lines so different from any she had known that the past would roll up like a scroll and be forgotten. He would not encourage meetings even with her parents and Merle would see no one associated with her unhappiness.

And that went for Roderick Brent.

Markham had not met Brent but had heard a lot about him from Merle. Brent was a writer and, apart from an instinctive dislike of writers and artists, Markham was convinced that Brent's influence on Merle had been unfortunate. She had known Brent since she was sixteen and he had talked at enormous length to her on all sorts of

subjects. According to Merle, sex had been excluded from their relations, but that did not reassure Markham as he vaguely suspected that Brent's influence might have been deeper on that account. Merle's association with Brent had been intermittent. Frequently a year or more had elapsed without their meeting but, whenever Merle encountered a crisis, Brent invariably turned up. After her attempt at suicide, he had stayed for several weeks at the Highgate flat.

Well, she would see remarkably little of Roderick Brent after she was married.

Markham rose, then stood irresolute. It was all very well to visualise plans for marriage, but, first, he had to settle with Flora.

"God only knows what line she'll take!"

He seemed to see her quite clearly with her curly black hair, almost violet eyes, and slightly voluptuous figure. The devil of it was that she loved him. She was wholly in love with him. No doubt about that. And, which was more serious, she was the romantic headlong type. Damn it, she might do *anything*.

He remembered his first meeting with her nearly four years ago when she had been serving in a West-End bar. She proved so popular that the manager of the recently-opened Atalanta Park Hotel—which was run on "luxury country house" lines about twenty miles out of London—had made Flora manageress of the American bar. The job was only a 'social' one, as Flora had no gift for organisation, but she had been a great success and had attracted many visitors to the Atalanta at a time when visitors were essential. Markham had stayed there most week-ends and had spent his evenings in the American bar. Naturally, Flora received amorous proposals from a number of men but rejected them with a sympathetic gaiety which transformed "lovers" into friends. Probably it was her immaculate quality which made her so popular, and it is certain that men of all kinds confided in her.

It had excited Markham to discover that the attractive, widely admired, twenty-year-old Flora was in love with him. It plumed his pride. Till now, his dealings with women had been on a commercial level, so it was an exhilarating experience to find himself loved, not only for the first time, but by a girl who could have had her choice of a dozen rich

men. Markham felt that he had under-rated his emotional appeal.

Flora became his mistress and Markham soon discovered his dependence on her. The evenings, the nights, ceased to be problems. Another world—a new rich vital world—opened magic doors when twilight shadowed London streets. For the first time in his life, his presence created joy in a human being—a generous lovely human being. Eager hands were outstretched towards him: ardent arms enfolded him. Trivialities became events. Everything stunted in him began to bud and blossom.

Soon after they became lovers, she left the Atalanta and he took a flat for her in Maida Vale. With the recognition of his dependence on her emerged the need to isolate her. His fear of losing Flora in these early days was so intense that he frequently considered marrying her, but the loss of prestige which such a marriage would involve, and the death of his "gentleman" dream, were considerations too compelling for his pride. So he compromised by assuring himself that his relations with Flora would be permanent; and by assuring her that he would never marry.

Having isolated her in the Maida Vale flat, Markham took elaborate precautions to hide their relationship from the Atalanta crowd. To do this effectively, he continued to spend a number of week-ends, greatly against his will, at the Atalanta—the manager of which had told American bar habitués that Flora had left presumbably to get married. As Flora's successor was a good-looking blonde, more amenable to amorous proposals, Flora soon became a memory. Nevertheless, Markham took considerable care to dodge old associates. Usually they dined at the flat but, when they went out, he took her to obscure restaurants at which it was most unlikely that they would encounter the opulent Atalanta crowd.

With one exception, everything with Flora had been blissful till his meeting with Merle.

The exception was that, during these three years with Flora, his affairs had prospered beyond even his expectations. He had become a power commercially and this fact caused misgivings when he contrasted it with his clandestine Maida Vale existence. After all, Flora was little more than a glorified barmaid. He had to entertain influential people at West-End restaurants and more than one of them had asked

why he didn't marry. The effect of all this was to revive his desire to present the exterior of a gentleman's life to the world. This dream began to emerge in alluring outline, even before he had met Merle. After meeting her, the determination to realise this dream became so overwhelming that Flora was soon regarded merely as an obstacle to its fulfilment.

He must go to Maida Vale now and have a final settlement. It wasn't a pleasant job, but he had done plenty of unpleasant ones in business and he'd better use the same methods. Still, it seemed strange that, after three years intimacy, he had not the remotest guess how Flora would respond to the blow he was about to deliver. God only knew what she might do. Oddly enough, like Merle, she was half-Irish.

She might do *anything*.

It would be confoundedly awkward if she told the whole story to that Atalanta crowd, because it contained several men who were important to him. He had been a fool to put her into that flat. They could have been lovers without more or less living together. To have isolated her in that flat implied a permanent arrangement. As things had worked out, he had made every possible mistake, especially telling her again and again that he would not marry. But it was useless to look back. He *had* isolated her—and, in a different way, he would isolate Merle. It was his nature to "corner" what belonged to him.

He would be generous to Flora regarding money, but would that mean a thing to her? You simply did not *know* with these romantic people! She might raise all hell.

He crossed to the table, mixed a stiff whisky and soda, drank half of it at a gulp, then picked up the midday paper.

The German Ambassador handed to Mr. Lloyd George the German reply to the Allied Ultimatum. It is a complete surrender to the Allied demands in detail.

For some moments he remained motionless, the paper still in his hand.

There would be money to be made—big money—during the next few years. That was certain. Already there were signs of a boom in his line. Once he was married to Merle, he would go out for big things. He'd plans. He'd go right ahead.

It is a complete surrender to the Allied demands in detail.

He threw the paper aside, then finished his drink.

A few minutes later, he got into his car, having told the chauffeur to take him to Maida Vale.

2

The car moved slowly through traffic-crammed streets. It was a travesty of a May afternoon: drab, with low-lying cloud, and a venomous east wind. The trees and flower-beds in Hyde Park had a startled air, as if pondering the mystery of spring's sudden and total treachery.

Markham leaned back in the car, an unheeded cigarette between his fingers, watching grey desolation.

It was clear from the news-posters that the end of the 1914 war had not ushered in the universal harmony which the deluded had confidently expected and which politicians had eloquently proclaimed. One poster announced: *Transport Hold-up Threat*. Another: *Entente Cordiale at Stake*—but these indications of national and international disunity did not divert Markham's thoughts, which were still intent on the theme of big money to be made during the next few years.

The more he explored this theme, the more convinced he became of its validity, although, side by side with conviction, was the equally confident belief that when things did begin to slip downhill, they would travel fast and go a long way. The going would be good for a few years, then it would be wise to get out—and sit tight. If things went the way he felt sure they would, he'd be in the ring-side seats of the arena soon after he was forty. He would be married to Merle. He would have a family. It seemed a pretty good outlook.

If only the car were bringing him back from Maida Vale instead of taking him there!

He found he was staring at the back of the chauffeur's head. Watson had driven him to Maida Vale often enough during the last three years and although he had never taken him to the actual block of flats where Flora lived—as he had always been told to stop at a point two hundred yards distant—nevertheless Watson must have ideas about these trips, because he knew perfectly well that Maida Vale represented something outside Markham's normal routine.

A few minutes later, the car drew up at its usual destination.

"I shan't want you again to-day, Watson. Ten in the morning."

"Very well, sir. Thank you."

He waited till the car had disappeared, then turned and walked slowly down a street flanked by blocks of flats.

Should he kiss her, or not, when she greeted him? This was the question he was trying to answer. If he kissed her, she would imagine everything was unchanged; if he didn't, she would guess why he had come. And he wanted that to be a gradual process.

He had never carried a key to the flat, which was on the ground floor, and as he approached the so-familiar door he was unable to decide whether it would have been better if he could have let himself in.

She must have been in the hall, waiting, because the bell had scarcely sounded when the door opened.

For some moments they gazed at each other, then she said in her deep-toned voice, which held a hint of Irish brogue:

"This is the last time you're coming, isn't it?"

He was too astonished to reply immediately, but at last managed to say:

"We can't talk here."

He followed her into the sitting-room which, by means mysterious to him, she had endowed with intimacy.

They stood looking round; each seeing different ghosts.

At last he glanced obliquely at her.

Hair, eyes, figure, had never seemed so attractive. He felt he was seeing the line of her neck for the first time.

"You'd better go," she whispered. "I can't stand this. I can't stand it for another second."

"Go! We've got to have a long talk."

"Why?"

"Because we have."

"There's nothing to say. I know it's over. Did you think I hadn't noticed a change in you—for weeks and weeks? Would you come here, at this time, just to talk?"

He had been certain that he would have to tell her his decision—and that her response would be incredulous surprise. But she knew. She had guessed, weeks ago. He was confronted by the situation he had intended to create.

"Look here, Flora," he said jerkily. "I—well—I never imagined you'd know why I've come. I hate having to do

this. And I never expected to have to do it. I know I told you again and again that things would stay as they were. And I believed it. But, as it happens, I'm going to marry and——"

"Marry? You?"

Amazement electrified her. She had swung round and was gazing at him with unbelieving eyes.

"Yes. Why shouldn't I marry?"

"Heavens! How unhappy you'll be!"

"Now, my dear girl! I know you've had a shock, but don't talk nonsense. How can you possibly know that I'll be unhappy?"

"You—married to a lady?"

"As a fact, I haven't said she's a lady."

"But she is. You wouldn't marry someone like me."

Then she went on:

"I thought you'd met some girl you liked better than me. I never dreamt you'd be such a fool as to marry."

She sat on the edge of an armchair, then leaned forward, elbows on knees, her hands half-covering her face.

He had expected everything except this. He had expected tears, reproaches, hysterics. He had expected threats, demands, even blackmail; but he certainly had not expected this devastating knowledge of his own nature. He had never dreamed that she knew him so intimately. He had been convinced that her conception of him was precisely what he had imagined it to be. To discover that she was familiar with aspects of his character, which he despised and tried to conceal, confused and annoyed him. And, knowing all this, she loved him! That seemed a miracle, but one which irritated him and made him contemptuous. Also, it offended his pride that she made no attempt to hold him. Just sat there, with her head in her hands, rocking slightly to and fro!

At last he said:

"You needn't think I'm going to desert you. I'm telling my bankers to send you a fiver a week and——"

She was laughing. He had never heard her laugh like that. It was genuine enough. It came from a tiny, isolated, part of her.

Instantly he became furious.

"Very well, Flora! As you evidently don't care a damn, I may as well go."

He went towards the door but, as she neither spoke nor moved, he stopped before reaching it and looked back.

There was something incalculable in her attitude—something which dismayed him.

A minute passed.

He still stood near the door—and she still sat on the edge of the armchair.

Another minute passed, then he crossed to her.

"Surely, Flora, we can part as friends. We've been very happy together and——"

"Happier than you'll ever be again."

"That's just damned nonsense!"

"It isn't. I love you—knowing you as you are. As you are. Does this other woman love you?"

"I've told you she's going to marry me."

"That's no answer."

In the silence that followed, he again felt contemptuous. Why didn't she fight? He'd always fought for what he'd wanted—fought like hell, with any and every weapon! Well, she wanted him, but she just sat there and let him go. It was unbelievable. He had reason to know that she had an ardent nature, so why did she surrender without firing a shot?

"God knows, Flora, I didn't want our last meeting to be like this, but you evidently want it to be this way, so don't blame me afterwards. I'm going now and, whether you laugh or not, I'm sending you money each week. I suppose it's too much to ask what you're going to do?"

"What is there for me to do?"

"For God's sake, talk sense! You're only twenty-three, aren't you? There's plenty of things you can do."

"Go back to the Atalanta?"

It was the last thing he wanted her to do. In fact, it would be devilish awkward if she went back—and talked. Damned awkward! Every one would know he had kept her. Merle, even, might hear of it.

His silence had lasted too long. She began to laugh.

"You don't care tuppence what I do. Anyway, there is nothing for me to do. There would be for lots of girls in my place, but not for me. You took me out of everything I'd known. You hid me here, then came and looked at me like a miser. Now, you're going. I filled a gap in your life. And

—you think—a wife will fill a bigger gap permanently. She may. She'll be an odd woman if she does."

"It's easy enough to say that I took you out of everything you'd known. I suppose you'll admit you made a pretty good dead-set at me."

The ensuing silence made the gibe seem despicably cheap.

"I suppose you think," he shouted, "that I ought to marry *you*."

"It was your only chance."

"God! I like that! *My* only chance! .And what about you?"

"I'd have been the happiest woman in the world."

That didn't make it any easier to get away. If only he could go, without an actual row! He waited, hoping she'd say something, but she remained silent.

Gradually, he became aware of a number of incongruous things: the curve of her hip; a passing taxi; faded flowers in a green vase; his photograph on the mantelpiece.

"Look here, Flora! You've got to tell me what you're going to do."

"Do? Drink myself to death, of course."

"Well, after *that*, I am going! You might have had the decency to be serious."

He went out, banging the door behind him. A moment later, the front door banged.

She did not move.

Twilight subdued the room, but she remained in the same attitude, rocking slightly to and fro

Three months later, Markham married Merle.

During the same week, Flora died.

Part I—Twelve Years Later

CHAPTER I

RE-UNION IN PARIS: MAY 1933

I

THE TRAIN pulled laboriously out of Amiens and gradually gained momentum for the remainder of the journey to Paris.

Its departure was a relief to Markham, as he had feared that his privacy might be disturbed, so he settled more comfortably in the corner of the first-class carriage, which he had had to himself since leaving Calais, then continued to review some recent and somewhat disturbing discoveries.

The passing of twelve years had created no fundamental alteration in his appearance. The dark crinkly hair had whitened at the temples; the complexion was more swarthy; lines had deepened in the forehead and round the melancholy eyes; but these changes were comparable with those effected by drops of water falling continually on to a stone. They were the result of repetitive thoughts and emotions. No new experience had set its seal on the aggressive features.

By his side were two or three French papers, at which he had scarcely glanced; an unfolded English paper was in his pocket. He had bought it at Dover, but had not even looked at the Stock Exchange prices.

Markham was on his way to meet Merle in Paris. A month ago she had gone to the Château Miramar at Verna, on the Italian lakes, with Marjorie Dawes, intending to stay a fortnight. He had had a couple of postcards from her.

As this was the first time since their marriage on which he had been separated from Merle for more than a night or two, he had spent a considerable number of evenings alone and, as a result, had made several discoveries.

An important one was the extent of his physical dependence on her, a dependence which had increased considerably during twelve years' intimacy, but he found nothing disturbing in that; whereas the recognition of his isolation from his twin sons had the impact of a blow.

The boys were eleven and had recently gone to a preparatory boarding school and would eventually go to Eton. Well, the inescapable fact was that their departure had been a relief. He found their society tiresome, chiefly because he could not identify himself with their interests, especially during summer holidays, which certainly did not appeal to him like the weeks he spent with Merle in the south of France—although he regretted her love of the continent and continental ways.

Eventually, he dismissed the problem with the reflection that he was not responsible if his paternal instinct were weak, but, nevertheless, this discovery disconcerted him. It revealed that his marriage meant Merle: that the children were shadowy, irrelevant, background figures. It was difficult, therefore, to believe that his home life in any way resembled that of a traditional English family. And he still wanted to believe that.

In addition to all this, Merle's recent attitude to the boys bewildered him. When they were children, she had devoted herself to them, to such an extent that he had complained she "treated them as if they were her own age and fussed them too much," but, after his decision to send them to boarding school, her attitude had altered. She had wanted them to remain at home for another year, but, when he insisted, she abruptly abandoned the argument.

"All right. Send them. They're yours—from now on. *You* look after them. *You* amuse them. It's about time you did something for them."

As he looked out of the window he did not see the passing French scenery in the May sunshine, but the tense defiant Merle who had shot those sentences at him. It was the nearest they had come to a row in twelve years, but he would rather the discussion had developed into a row instead of ending with Merle laughing until she was nearly helpless.

Markham lit a cigarette.

Well, it was no good picking out the things that hadn't gone too well—especially as he wanted to be his best when he met her in Paris. After all, he owed himself, and her, a good time after this separation. Besides, plenty of things had worked out better than he could have hoped. Joyce was one of them.

Joyce had died a few years ago, to the immense relief of his wife, Agatha. His death had resulted from injuries

sustained in a motor accident and, to Agatha, the manner of his departure from this world seemed wholly appropriate to his tempestuous journey through it. Anyhow, this was the end of him and Agatha made no attempt to mask her satisfaction. Now she could lead that placid existence which the turbulent Joyce had made impossible. She would have no more shocks from him.

But she found that she had under-rated Joyce. From the grave, he gave her one more shock. And the most enigmatic of the many she had received.

Joyce's will revealed that he had had a mistress, Daphne, for some years. Nothing very surprising in that, but, when Daphne appeared, looking somewhat like the Agatha whom Joyce had married, the bewilderment of the middle-aged widow was overwhelming. She could only stare at her blonde supplanter, feeling that she was magically confronted by herself on her wedding day.

But her bewilderment did not end there. Before long, she discovered a temperamental affinity with Daphne. Soon, they were friends. In a few months, they were living together in a small flat in Highgate.

Why Joyce had chosen, for the second time, a placid woman who only wanted a commonplace existence remained an inscrutable mystery to Agatha—a mystery not lessened by the fact that Daphne had a totally different conception of Joyce from the one so firmly held by Agatha. It was the one subject on which they disagreed.

But although Markham had welcomed Joyce's death, chiefly because he had feared that sooner or later he would create a first-class scandal, there were two circumstances associated with it which had annoyed him at the time and which irritated him now.

The first was that Joyce had left Merle a few thousand pounds; an act which Markham regarded as an implied criticism of himself. Merle had all the money she needed, consequently Joyce's bequest seemed to hint at the possibility that, one day, Merle might want to be independent. More than once Joyce had said to her, after surveying the splendours of the flat near Hyde Park Corner: "Well, you've everything you want. Or haven't you?" He had asked the question in an odd tone and Markham had resented it. Merle had never referred to the money her father had left her and this also irritated Markham. It would have

irritated him if she had asked about it, for that would have implied lack of confidence in him ; and it irritated him that she ignored it, because that implied indifference to the immense importance of money.

The other unpleasant circumstance associated with Joyce's death had been Merle's extraordinary attitude towards Daphne. Apparently Merle had known for some years that Daphne was Joyce's mistress and had accepted the fact with a casual tolerance which infuriated Markham when he eventually discovered it. He pointed out, with considerable emphasis, that Joyce had consistently deceived his wife, but Merle had replied that Daphne had spared Agatha a lot—that Joyce was too much for one woman—and that, anyhow, he had been happy with Daphne and that was all that mattered.

Markham had said angrily :

" You defend him now. You loathed him once. Your one idea was to get away from him."

" I loathed living under the same roof with him, but I understood him. He wanted something he knew he could never get, but that didn't stop him looking for it. Most people throw their hand in. He didn't."

Markham tossed his cigarette out of the window.

Well, there was no need to go into all that.

Another satisfactory fact was that they had seen precious little of that writer—Roderick Brent. Which was all to the good. He did not like Brent and he resented his former influence over Merle. Anyway, they had seen nothing of him for over two years.

Again, he looked out of the window and for some moments gazed disparagingly at the passing French scenery. His dislike of foreigners had deepened to such a degree that it now extended to everything relating to them.

He filled a pipe slowly, lit it, then his thoughts began to explore a theme which always produced deep satisfaction.

In his business career, everything had gone according to plan. Facts had subsequently confirmed the confidence he had felt, in 1921, about the trend of trade in the immediate future. During the six years following his marriage, he had gone out for big things with remarkable success. He had been in a position to implement his own ideas and he had implemented them, despite enraged and eminent opposition.

Markham had been convinced that the day of the

"passenger" and the amateur in commercial high places was over. His experience during the 1914 war had convinced him that, in a machine age, technicians were aristocrats, and he had insisted on employing the best technical brains obtainable—and on giving them supreme authority inside their own sphere. He had also insisted on ruthless scrapping of obsolete plant, and on the introduction of scientific costing methods.

His dynamic drive galvanised those associated with him. He made a great deal of money. In 1927, his uncle died, leaving him a considerable part of his fortune, so Markham found himself a very rich man before he was forty. Early in 1928 he got rid of all speculative ventures and, when Wall Street exploded in 1929, he instinctively recognised that explosion as the end of an epoch.

But although Markham derived deep satisfaction from the contemplation of his triumph—as he continued to smoke his pipe while the train raced towards Paris—that satisfaction was notably reduced when he contrasted his success with the world-background which was its setting.

Again, he looked out of the window.

France!

A year or two ago, France had begun to construct the Maginot Line. That showed France's faith in the prospect of peace. A fanatic, Hitler, had just seized power in Germany. A cobbler's son still ruled Russia: an ex-blacksmith still ruled Italy. A new age had come. A volcanic age.

Unemployment was spreading like plague in America, in Germany, in England. Important European banks had closed; money was being withdrawn from London. Not very long ago, a National Government had been formed to keep England on the Gold Standard. Mutiny in the British fleet had promptly sent the Gold Standard to Davy Jones's locker. Last year, there had been the Kreuger scandal. Now, in France, rumours about Stavisky were becoming more sinister. A Disarmament Conference was sitting at Geneva. A sure sign that every one was frightened. Soon, there was to be a World Economic Conference. Another sure sign that every one was frightened. MacDonald was premier. A conclusive sign that every one was terrified. Life had become a permanent earthquake, during which people talked only of Security.

Stock Exchange prices interpreted the significance of world events in a language with which Markham had long been familiar. Fear was dictator. It had undermined all the old certainties. Soon, there would be nothing left to underpin.

The contemplation of his success on this catastrophic background reduced it to precarious proportions. He felt like a man, sitting on a pile of paper securities, surrounded by a prairie fire.

He knocked out his pipe, then rose and stretched himself. It was useless to think about things over which he had no control, but it angered him to see English power and English prestige diminishing, because the only chance of a possible world was for England to be dominant. God only knew what these damned foreigners would do! Start a war—drag us into it—then let us down!

He flung himself back into his seat.

They wouldn't stay long in Paris. Merle would want to, of course, because she loved being abroad, but he couldn't bother about that. Probably he'd been a fool to let her go to Verna with Marjorie Dawes. Naturally, Marjorie had wanted to stay at the Château Miramar. Luxury hotels were her game—especially if they were out of England. She had a nose for good hunting. Still, it had been impossible for him to go with Merle, who had been very nervous lately. The doctor had said she needed a complete change—and that she couldn't go alone. Her mother was never any help—never did anything but stay in that Highgate flat with Daphne and go to the films three times a week. So what could he have done but let Merle go with Marjorie? All the same, he regretted it. The Dawes had become too intimate lately. He'd have to talk to Merle about that. He'd have to talk to Merle about a lot of things.

During the many solitary evenings he had spent recently, Markham had reviewed their relations with others and had derived little satisfaction from the result. He had made the obvious discovery that their social activities were divided sharply into two isolated categories: important business people, whom they entertained at West-End restaurants; and everyday associates who came almost daily to the flat.

As regards the former, Merle was a perfectly adequate hostess, although he knew that these influential people bored her; while they, from their angle, clearly regarded her as a

somewhat exotic wife for a remarkably tough business man. That wasn't too satisfactory, but the character of their everyday associates disturbed him more deeply—especially Major Dawes and his wife, Marjorie.

He had met the major at his club a few years ago and had gradually become intimate with him. In retrospect, this seemed extraordinary, because his first reaction to Dawes had been a slight feeling of repugnance. Dawes had been a temporary officer during the war and had stayed in the army till economy campaigns had ended his military career. He belonged to the numerous type who are disintegrated by the army and, on finding himself a civilian again, his chief desire was to indulge the habits he had acquired as an officer. Before 1914 he had been an estate agent, but he did not return to that activity. He picked up a precarious living playing bridge, doing odd jobs for men he met at the club, or picked up in bars, and, generally, lived the life of a super-parasite. He was attractive in an odd way and did pretty well in the hazardous profession of living by one's wits.

Finally, he married Marjorie, partly because she had a little money, but chiefly because they were linked temperamentally, although this fact did not prevent some rousing rows. He had convinced her that he would pull off something—something big. Dawes could be very convincing, but Marjorie extended all his gifts in that direction almost to exhaustion point. Still, he did convince her. She was tall, plain, except for remarkable almost black eyes and an exciting figure. The Dawes were parasites, but useful ones. They knew all aspects of the West End and they knew the continent well. Imperceptibly, Dawes became indispensable to Markham, who disliked making arrangements at restaurants, night clubs, or for trips abroad. Marjorie amused Merle, so, one way and another, the Dawes had become almost everyday companions. Markham had realised this only when intimacy was fully established. And, now, this intimacy disturbed him.

Recently, at the club, he had heard rumours about Dawes. Not too pleasant rumours. They might be the merest fabrications—they probably were—but they had made him recognise the extent to which he and Merle were involved with Dawes. And he did not like it.

Dawes was useful—of course he was useful! He had made all the arrangements for this re-union with Merle at

the Hotel Capri in the Rue de Rivoli. Dawes saved him trouble in a hundred ways, but that did not affect the fact that, a few years ago, he would have refuted the possibility of dependence on a man like the major.

And it was not only the Dawes. What about John Wade, who came to the flat most evenings for cocktails and who often accompanied them to night clubs? Wade was all right, in his way. He was a self-made man who—at the age of forty-five—began to seek compensation for the rigours and abstinence imposed by early years of struggle. Till a year ago, he had had to put the whole of his drive into his career but, directly he attained independence, he left his wife, took a flat in the West End, and started to live the life of “a man about town” which, apparently, had long been his secret ideal.

As a result of associating with Dawes and Wade—who were very friendly—Markham and Merle knew a whole crowd of people, picked up at restaurants and night clubs, about whom their actual knowledge was scanty. All this had not worried Markham till recently but, during the evenings he had spent alone, owing to Merle’s absence, he had contrasted his mode of life with the one he had intended to present to the world—and had been appalled by the abyss between them.

There would have to be a change. And it was high time Merle stopped her friendship with Harry Green, the old eccentric who lived in a flat on the floor above theirs. High time! Old Green was in a romantic second childhood. And Merle would listen to his anecdotes and memories for hours! There would have to be a change. There would have to be several changes. Incidentally, Merle sometimes drank rather too much when she was bored. That would have to stop. He looked at his watch. If the train were on time, he’d be in Paris in a quarter of an hour.

Yes, he had been a fool to let Merle go to the Château Miramar with Marjorie Dawes. A damned fool! And why had Merle decided to stay another fortnight? Why had she written only a couple of postcards? And why had she told him not to meet her at the station, but to wait at the Hotel Capri?

He made a movement with his hands, implying that women were incalculable, then took the London paper from his pocket.

HITLER DEMANDS REVISION OF VERSAILLES TREATY.

He read the first paragraph.

"Tension in Europe becomes more taut every day. The deadlock continues at the Disarmament Conference. Recently, Berlin told Lord Hailsham that 'Ultimatums will have no effect on us.' Now, Hitler demands revision of the Versailles Treaty."

He re-read the paragraph, then threw the paper aside. A few minutes later, the train reached Paris.

2

When in Paris, Markham always stayed at the Hotel Capri.

There were several reasons for this, the real one being that he was received with immense respect at the Capri. His arrival was an event. The best suite luxuriously welcomed him; the manager paraded his most obsequious attentions; the chef went into conference with his muse. The commissionaire gave him a special salute—in which liberty, equality, and fraternity were equally represented. At the Crillon, Markham would have caused no stir. So Markham did not stay at the Crillon.

This principle of frequenting only those places where his wealth would attract maximum homage was also operative in London. Markham avoided restaurants, hotels, night clubs at which those eminent by birth, position, or attainments would relegate him to obscurity. When he appeared, the eyes of the *maitre d'hôtel* must flash with unique fervour. He must instantly leave those who, a moment before, had seemed important. The head waiter, the wine waiter, must gambol like lambs in a spring meadow. Monsieur Markham and his so-beautiful wife! Ah! *Quel honneur!*

This fluttering attention, this subtly-scored subservience, had a wooing fragrance. He felt its purr-producing effect now, as he stood in a pink-and-white sitting-room at the Capri, surrounded by the manager—whose gesticulating enthusiasm multiplied him, till he became a corps de ballet, gyrating rhythmically and reverently.

Monsieur see? The ver pale rose which Madame like. Remember? But of course he remember! How could he forget? And—Madame? Where is Madame? Verna! The Château Miramar! Ah! *The—Château—Miramar—!*

He gazed down celestial vistas, as if the name of the Château Miramar had transported him to a heaven known only to hotel managers.

When, at last, Markham was alone, he looked round with a satisfaction which would have been inappropriate to reveal to the manager. Yes, this attractively-shaped room with its gay furniture really was rather jolly in the flickering sunshine. The view, too, across the Place de la Concorde was quite good, in its way. And the arrangement of the roses was remarkably effective. The French certainly had taste, but then foreigners had to possess secondary gifts, like taste and style, in order to have some justification for their existence.

He crossed to the window, then stood watching the passing traffic.

It was a damned strange notion of hers to want him to wait for her here, instead of meeting at the station! He hoped it did not mean she was still in a nervous state. She certainly had been queer lately. She had wanted to go out somewhere almost every night, although she was tired of theatres and night clubs. He really would have to have a serious talk with her. And she really would have to control that neurotic strain in her. It wasn't reassuring to remember that she was Joyce's daughter and—

A slight sound made him turn.

Merle, motionless in the doorway. So motionless, that she might have been hypnotised.

"Here you are! At last!"

He had taken two strides towards her, but stopped abruptly.

She had not moved, her face was still averted, but the change in her astounded him. She looked younger, much younger, than at their first meeting. He went nearer. The texture of the skin had altered: the figure, attractively indicated by a dark close-fitting suit, was almost that of a girl. She was Merle—mysteriously transformed. Someone had waved a magic wand.

"Well, haven't you anything to say?"

There was a rising note of uneasiness in his tone.

For the first time, she looked at him.

The expression of the wide-open eyes had changed, but what disturbed him more deeply was the sudden certainty that they were gazing at someone else.

"For God's sake, Merle, what's the matter? Has something happened?"

"Something's happened."

"Don't stand there, as if you're in a trance, saying something's happened! What is it?"

"If he sends for me, I shall go to him."

He stepped back, then stared at her.

"Are you out of your mind? Or are you drunk?"

"You'll never understand. He isn't a man. He's God. It's nothing to do with sex. He's God."

She passed him, then sat on the edge of a small armchair near the window. Her attitude suggested that she was watching, or listening to, someone.

"I've kept my temper till now. But I'm not standing this damned nonsense for another second. D'you understand? Not for another second!"

"I shall go when he sends for me."

"For Christ's sake don't talk like a madwoman! Look at me! Look at me as if you *see* me! I'm your husband. We've been married for twelve years. We've two sons."

"I told you I didn't love you when you wanted to marry me. I'm in love for the first time in my life—and nothing that you say, or that any one says, will make the slightest difference."

"And your children don't count either?"

"They're your children. You wanted them. I didn't. I told you I didn't. You decide what's to be done with them. I don't. I didn't want them to go to boarding school for another year. But they went, because you wanted them to. Then, they'll go to Eton. To Eton. And you don't think that's funny."

The sentences belonged to her about as intimately as those seemingly uttered by a ventriloquist's dummy.

He crossed to her.

"What's the name of this blackguard?"

"Which blackguard?"

"This man you dare to say you're in love with."

"Boris Yashvin."

"A—*foreigner*?"

"He's half-Russian and half-Italian."

He remained silent so long that at last she said in the same impersonal tone:

"He's forty. He's married and has a son. His wife

is an invalid. She lives at Berne and he's in the silk trade——"

"*Shut up!* Unless you want me to strike you."

"I don't mind if you strike me."

He turned—raged up and down the room—then stopped near her.

"And this dago—this Boris Yashvin!—is going to leave his wife and whistle you to him, like a street woman. Is that it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't *lie!*"

"I'm not interested enough."

"Haven't you said about three times that you'll go to him if he sends for you?"

"I don't know if he will send for me."

"So you've offered yourself, and now you're waiting to see if he'll have you?"

"I've written telling him that, directly he sends for me, I'll come. I've just posted the letter. You think it's sex. It isn't. You think he's just a man. He isn't. He's God."

"Queer idea of God—half-Russian and half-Italian!"

"Yes, international. Just what you'd expect."

Then she went on:

"I'm sorry for you. I've been sorry for you for a long time. For a very long time. You ought to have married quite a different sort of woman. I can't think why you didn't. I've wondered about that for years. There's something you always hide. You've invented a character you'd like to be—and you're determined to believe you're it. That must be a terrible strain."

"I don't want an analysis of my character from you! You've none! That's very evident. I know you—now. You are your father's daughter."

"That's not uncommon—for a woman."

Then she added:

"If only you'd say one thing—only one—just one—which would be unexpected."

"I leave that to your Boris Yashvin. Though, I promise you, *he'll* get something he doesn't expect before long."

"Yes—me."

After a silence, she said:

"I'm terribly tired. I haven't slept for two nights."

"I can't believe it, Merle! I can't *believe* it! After all I've done for you."

"You haven't done anything for me. You've never done anything for anyone. You know that. I woke up at Verna—woke up with a start—and saw you. Saw you, as you are, for the first time. If Boris didn't exist, I'd be a criminal to stay with you."

"I can't talk to a raving lunatic! Where's that Marjorie Dawes? I want to see her—and I want to see her now. She suggested that Verna trip. She wanted to stay at the Château Miramar, although every one knows its character. Well, where is she? Why didn't she bring you here, before going to her fifth-rate hotel? *Where is she?*"

"I don't know."

"For the love of God and all his angels, do talk sense! You know who I'm talking about, don't you? Marjorie Dawes, the wife of that major tout."

"Yes, I know. Friends of yours. Yours. You met him at the club, a long time ago. You asked him to the flat. Then you began letting him do odd jobs which you were too lazy—or too proud—to do for yourself. I know the Dawes all right. But I don't know where Marjorie is. She left Verna a week ago."

"Left Verna!"

"A week ago."

"She gets you to go there—knowing you're not well. She sees you're hypnotised by some adventurer, then leaves you! Where is she? You know where she is."

"I don't. She went to Milan a week ago. She may still be there. I've no idea."

"You're asking me to believe that she just disappeared! You woke up one morning to find out she'd gone without a word. Is that what you mean?"

"She left a note, saying she wouldn't take the responsibility of staying as I was in love with Boris. I thought she might write to you."

"Went to Milan! Alone, of course!"

"I really don't know—and I really don't care."

He began to stride up and down again.

He had used the most compelling arguments without result. It was like bludgeoning a shadow; or arguing with a ghost. The essential Merle wasn't in the room. Till now,

her body had been overwhelming reality, but, now, it had lost substance. It was there, but it seemed a shell.

A feeling of impotence numbed him, like emotional paralysis. This sense of impotence urged surrender. It urged him to say. "You must do what you like, Merle. If you go, it's the end of me." But, side by side, with this enervating impotence, was an anger which grew with it. And finally triumphed.

He must end this. He must frighten her. You don't argue with an hysterical woman. Only action would have any effect. He must do something that would scare this romantic nonsense out of her head, once and finally.

"Listen to me, Merle. You're my wife and you'll do what I say. If you don't, I shall leave you. We're not staying here. We're going to London. And we're going now."

"I'm not. I'm far too tired."

"I tell you—we're going!"

"I'm not."

He pulled out a pile of five hundred franc notes, then pressed the bell again and again.

When it was answered, he demanded to see the manager—immediately.

In due course the latter arrived and was instantly aware that all was not well with Monsieur Markham and his so-charming wife. On learning that Monsieur intended to go now—this moment—with his so-charming wife, the manager's interest veered abruptly to the business aspect of the situation and he indicated that, he had understood, the visit of Madame and Monsieur would last for at least a week.

"I've asked for the bill, haven't I? Make it out for what you like! A week! A month! All I want is to get out of here. Now! D'you understand? *Now!*"

The manager understood—perfectly. If Monsieur would wait a minute, he should have the bill. At once! Immediately! This moment! Now!

But Monsieur would not wait. He would pay at the office, while a page got a taxi.

The manager bounced, like a ball, to nether regions.

"Are you ready, Merle?"

She took off her hat.

"I'm too tired."

"You're to leave here with me. Now!"

"I'm not coming."

The door banged behind him. She heard him shouting downstairs. Then—silence.

Five minutes later, she was asleep on a sofa.

CHAPTER II

FERMENT

I

THE INTENSITY of our private preoccupations is indicated by the extent to which we are aware of others. Intensity isolates. In moments of mental or emotional extremity, our inner world becomes the universe.

Markham had left the Hotel Capri in a raging temper which obliterated everything except its own fury, but, having flown to England, and finding himself now in a taxi on its way to Hyde Park Corner, anger ceased as abruptly as a tropical storm—with the result that his present situation was revealed in ominous perspective.

It was only his certainty that Merle would not let him leave her in Paris which had urged him to threaten immediate departure: and only anger at her decision to stay had enabled him to implement his threat. But, now, the danger of leaving her alone in Paris emerged with overwhelming clarity.

He might never see her again! She had said she had written to that blackguard, telling him that if he sent for her, she would join him immediately. She had posted that letter on reaching Paris. To-morrow, or the next day, he might wire or telephone—and Merle would go to Verna. Possibly, the one thing she had wanted was to be alone for the next few days.

But bewilderment soon obscured a logical survey of his predicament. He could not concentrate on what might happen because it was impossible to believe that this *had* happened. He was in the state in which a man feels that at any moment he will wake, and so be delivered from the perplexities of a maddening dream. Merle—in love with another man! Merle—longing to leave him! Merle—offering herself to a foreigner!

Merle.

It was impossible—grotesque! This couldn't happen to him. To another man, perhaps, but not to him. Not to Oliver Markham. Why——

"Here you are, sir!"

The taxi had stopped.

He got out, gave the man some money, then stood looking up at the great block of flats. Twelve years. Yes, twelve years.

He walked through the hall, then entered the lift, a porter following with the luggage.

"Soon back, sir."

"What? Yes."

Fifth floor.

The lift attendant must have rung the bell because the door had opened and a maid was giving a hand taking in the luggage, but these activities seemed to relate to someone else, not to him.

Nothing could have indicated his state more pertinently than the fact that he remained unaware of the parlourmaid's surprise at his sudden and solitary return. Actually, his inner preoccupation was so intense that some time elapsed before he realised that she had remained in the hall, after the lift attendant's departure, and was now gazing at him with an expression of considerable bewilderment.

"Is anything the matter, sir?"

"What? No, why should there be? Yes, there is, though. Your mistress is ill. That's why she's staying in Paris."

The fatuity of this reply became obvious directly it was uttered. Nevertheless, he remained silent, staring at the girl, who had been with them only a few weeks and whom he had entirely ignored till now. He dimly remembered that her name was Celia and that Merle had been enthusiastic about her from their first meeting.

"Your name's Celia, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked at her more narrowly.

She was about nineteen with a vital little figure, dark curly hair, and a beautifully shaped head. But it was the expectation of the mobile features which made her appealing—an expectation emphasised by the light in the blue eyes and the slightly-parted sensitive lips.

"I'll have to tell you something, Celia, but, before I do,

I'll ask you a question—and you're to tell the truth. You don't look like a liar."

"I'm not a liar."

There was unconscious dignity in the tone and no trace of resentment.

"Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Oh yes! About anything important."

"This is important. Something has happened. Something serious. It doesn't matter what it is. It's enough for you to know that something *has* happened and that it *is* serious. If I didn't tell you that, you'd guess it. But, if any one questions you about your mistress, you're to say she's ill. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He overlooked the fact that, having established she was not a liar, he had instantly instructed her to lie. Celia, too, was unaware of this inconsistency because sympathy for this haggard man made her lips quiver.

"Wouldn't you like something to eat?"

"Eat! Bring the whisky!"

He forgot her existence directly she left the room, consequently he started when she returned to place a small tray on the little table by his armchair.

"Are you sure there's nothing else?"

He stood looking down at her.

The ferment in him was so great that he saw, not a girl of nineteen, gazing at him with candid blue eyes, but a representative of the treacherous and terrible tribe of woman.

"There's nothing else. Go to bed."

When she reached the door, she turned.

He was lying inert in an armchair. For some moments she hesitated, but eventually closed the door behind her.

Directly she had gone, he rose, mixed a stiff whisky which he swallowed at a gulp, then looked round the room as if seeking assurance of some kind—of any kind.

The sitting-room had not altered since he had contemplated it with such satisfaction, years ago, before leaving to break with Flora. The sound, solid, expensive furniture stood in the old familiar places. Individual pieces still had an isolated air, as if waiting to be introduced, but Markham was still unaware of it. He was also unaware of the more remarkable fact that Merle's presence had effected no change

in the arrangement or the atmosphere of the room. For twelve years a woman had lived here, but nothing reflected her taste, or the caress of her influence. Merle, clearly, had regarded this flat as part of the going concern, known as Oliver Markham, and had accepted it as such.

He mixed another drink, then began to pace wearily up and down.

Half-Italian, half-Russian! An adventurer, unknown a month ago, for whom she'd throw away everything. And he, her husband, had ceased to exist for her! When she looked at him, she didn't see him! She went on as if she had just awakened from a trance—or had just fallen into one. It would puzzle the devil to know which. No wonder a feeling of impotence had nearly paralysed him—no wonder he had felt it useless to argue with someone who *wasn't there*.

He stopped, then, stared at the carpet.

Was that what Flora had felt? He had been contemptuous of her because she had not fought to hold him, but had she realised the futility of fighting a shadow?

He made an irritable movement with his hands. What was Flora to do with anything? He had not thought of her for years.

Then, as he paced the room again, the knowledge stung him that this was failure. For the first time he had encountered failure, and failure which could not be hidden. Others were going to know that his married life had collapsed, and not a few would derive malicious satisfaction from the fact that Oliver Markham, who had been prodigal of punches in business, had taken a punch below the domestic belt. Others were going to know that Merle had fallen in love with a foreigner and, as his views on foreigners were well known at the club, the situation would not lack piquancy.

He stopped by the little table to pick up his drink.

If Merle did not come to her senses, there was one thing and one only he could do which would leave him with a remnant of dignity—and that was to divorce her. If he divorced her, people would recognise the Oliver Markham with whom they were familiar. They'd say he'd cut his loss—that it had always been his principle to cut losses and that he'd lived up to it.

But the devil of it was that the public Markham was not the private one. All the reasons which had impelled him to marry Merle were still operative. If he divorced her, he

would get the custody of the children, and what would he do with them? Marry again? But the whole point was that only Merle could play the complicated rôle which his nature compelled him to demand in a wife. She looked the part; she was outside all social categories. If he married a lady, she would expect the traditional family life that, theoretically, he admired, but of which, temperamentally, he was incapable. If he married a nobody, she would not see the necessity for leading one kind of life while parading the pretence of another.

Besides, he wanted Merle! He wanted her as he had never wanted her. He wanted this new Merle—this transformed Merle. The Merle who had stood in that doorway, looking beyond him with visionary eyes.

There must be a way out. It was a cardinal belief of his that, always, there is a way out.

The first thing to do was to face up to the fact that in her present state she was capable of any insanity. This was the Merle who had flung herself from that fourth-floor window. She had proved once that she had no limits and now she was proving it again. So, although it made him almost sick to admit it, the only hope was in the man. This foreigner. This—Boris Yashvin!

Yashvin was married—his wife was an invalid, living at Berne—and he had a son. He was forty and in the silk trade. So it didn't seem probable that he would be a moon-struck romantic and, therefore, it was possible that he would regard Merle's letter as a fit of temporary insanity which would end when she returned to normal routine.

Possible, but far from certain. Yashvin had been attracted by her to such an extent that he had made no attempt to mask the fact but had advertised it so blatantly that Marjorie Dawes would not take the responsibility of remaining at the Miramar. Yashvin, presumably, had prevailed on Merle to prolong her stay at Verna. So, although he would be most unlikely to break up his marriage, it was probable that, when he read Merle's letter and realised the extent of his influence over her, he would exert that influence to get her to return to Verna in order to become his mistress. If he sent for her, she would go—and would then discover that Yashvin was a man, not God, and that sex had quite a lot to do with their relations.

On the other hand, there was a chance that Merle's letter

would frighten him to such a degree that she would hear no more of her Boris Yashvin.

He finished his drink, mixed another, then sat in the armchair. He was terribly tired, but he must evolve a plan of some kind and, somehow, control the anger which blazed through him whenever the knowledge of his humiliation lashed him.

A minute later, having discovered that he had left his pipe in his overcoat pocket, he rose wearily.

He went to the hall and was about to return to the sitting-room, when he heard someone singing softly. He took a few paces down the passage leading to the servants' quarters, then stopped and listened. It was a young clear voice. It must be Celia. Celia, singing to herself, before she went to sleep. What the devil had she got to sing about?

He went back to the sitting-room, lit a pipe, then came to a decision.

On balance, it was unlikely that Yashvin would break up his married life to please Merle. If he suggested an affair, her romanticism might be revolted and she would be jerked out of her trance. Also, there was a possibility that being left alone in Paris would have an effect and that she would come home to-morrow or the next day. Anyhow, surely, she would telephone. If she didn't return, or if she came back still hypnotised, he would have to tell their intimate associates what had happened. Till then, he would not say anything to any one.

He reviewed that, point by point, put down his pipe, went into the bedroom, and switched on the lights.

He stood, looking in turn at the black lacquer furniture, at her things on the dressing table, at photographs of Joyce and the boys, at the little row of her books, at a solitary artificial flower on the mantelpiece.

Then he stared at the big double bed. . . .

Merle did not telephone the next day and no letter came from her. She did not telephone on the day following—and no letter came from her.

By seven in the evening Markham had reached the state in which the worst news seems preferable to none. He could no longer endure agonising uncertainty. If she had left Paris and returned to Verna—and her silence suggested this—it was better to know. It was better than listening to the tick of that damned clock!

But there was only one source of information—the Hote. Capri. He couldn't telephone the Capri and talk to that manager! The fellow knew of course that he had quarrelled with Merle. He couldn't endure confiding in that flunkey who, under an affectation of servility, would wallow in the fact that the so-beautiful Madame was tired of her so-boring husband. He couldn't! It would conflict too flagrantly with his rôle of *milord* at the Capri. He *couldn't*.

But, by seven o'clock, he could.

He put a call through to Paris, replaced the receiver, then raged up and down, waiting for the bell to ring.

At last! And about time too!

"Hotel Capri? Now, listen! Get the manager—it doesn't *matter* who's speaking! Get the *manager*! Tell him it's an urgent confidential call."

Silence.

"Monsieur Markham? Ah! Directly they tell me—'London, confidential, urgent'—to myself I say: Monsieur Markham! Yes, Madame is still here. She go out—scarcely at all. No, no! Never have she been better. Never! She look like a *jeune fille*. She unpack—hardly one thing. She say that—any minute—she go. Monsieur have nothing to distress him. Nothing! Never have Madame been so considerate. Ah! So considerate! The maid who attend Madame is enchanted. But of course I say nothing! I understand—perfectly. You have not telephoned? But of course you have not telephoned! What an idea! *Pardon*? No! From Italy—no telephone call for Madame. From London—one telephone call for Madame. Letters—from Italy? It may be. I do not know. It may be. And—Monsieur? He is better? Ah! *bon*! No, no, no! You have not telephoned! I hear nothing! I know nothing! I say nothing! I understand—perfectly!"

Markham put down the receiver.

She had not altered.

Either she would go to Verna, or come home and wait for Yashvin to make up his mind, but, whichever she did, others would have to know. Possibly some knew already. This depended on whether Marjorie Dawes had returned from Milan and had told that husband of hers about Merle and Yashvin. Anyhow, it would be better to tell those who would have to know, and to tell them soon. To-morrow!

And he would make it very clear that he expected them to keep their mouths shut.

2

Less than twenty-four hours after Markham's decision, those affected by it were engaged in very different activities.

Agatha was alone in the sitting-room of her Highgate flat, waiting for Daphne to return. The furniture, the decorations, had a faded sentimental air which corresponded perfectly with that of Agatha.

At the present moment she was enumerating her blessings, every one of which dated from the day of her husband's death. There was no photograph of Joyce in the sitting-room. There were photographs of the twin sons she had lost in the war; a photograph of Merle with her children; but none of Joyce. Not in the sitting-room. There was a photograph of him in Daphne's room, but, for years, the widow and the former mistress had agreed not to discuss Joyce. Daphne treasured her memories of him—Agatha trembled before hers. So silence was a diplomatic necessity.

She started violently when the telephone bell rang.

Agatha had never wanted to have the telephone, but, as Daphne said it made shopping easy on wet days, she had reluctantly consented.

She picked up the receiver gingerly.

Oliver!

Although he seemed quite a satisfactory husband, and although he gave excellent advice about investments, Agatha did not like her son-in-law. She had tried to like Oliver, but had failed, so had decided that she respected him.

His voice was more rasping even than usual.

Yes, she was alone. No one would hear what she said. Was—anything—the matter?

"Oh, no! There's nothing the matter! Your daughter is proposing to leave her husband and go off with a foreigner, but, presumably, by Joyce standards, that isn't anything . . . I'd rather you didn't talk. I want you to listen. . . . I must ask you to come to my flat—and to come now. Other people are coming, but I want to see you alone first. So perhaps you'll come at once."

He had banged down the receiver.

She began to tremble violently.

She might have known! She might have guessed!

Merle was *his* daughter. So, sooner or later, she would do something terrible. She would break up everything for some mad whim, just as *he* had always broken up everything.

If only she could stop trembling!

She had been so happy with Daphne in this flat. She had felt so secure. Merle was married and, anyhow, she was a woman and much less likely therefore to resemble her outrageous father. She had been terrified that her sons would resemble him. So terrified that, when the news came of their deaths in France, her sole consolation had been the removal of the haunting dread that one or other of them might turn out like Joyce.

She must go! Oliver was waiting for her.

She must leave a note for Daphne. They had intended to have a late tea together—with eclairs. And she loved eclairs. Then they were going to a Bing Crosby film. And she worshipped Bing Crosby. If only she had married some one like Bing Crosby!

She wrote a note for Daphne, but her hand shook so violently that she had to write another in which she said that she had got to see Oliver as there 'was trouble about Merle.'

She put on a light coat and an old-fashioned hat, then hurried out, hoping to catch a bus immediately.

Meanwhile John Wade was having a drink with a woman half his age in the café of the Barsestshire club. The café was a comparatively recent innovation and was the only part of the club to which women were admitted. It was large, oblong, brightly decorated, with numerous small tables, and was usually very full between six and seven-thirty each evening.

Wade was forty-five, although an estimate—intended to be flattering—would have put him in the early fifties. Most of the crude features were extinct, but the expression of the small grey eyes revealed that Wade expected certain things from life and had every intention of getting them. He had a heavy bullet-shaped head, a short thick neck, and broad shoulders. He was under middle height, with rather long arms and rather short legs, consequently he lacked attraction, but this was unknown to Wade, as he had a mental picture of himself, which, he was convinced, represented the reality although it conflicted with all the physical facts.

His companion was an experienced-looking blonde with standardised glamour. She had everything her type should have. That's why she was there. The manner in which she studied the occupant of an adjoining table—and she frequently studied the occupant of an adjoining table—was remarkably expert, for she convinced Wade that he had all her attention.

He was talking on his favourite subject, which was that no one could expect a man like him—a successful man—to live a humdrum life with a woman he had married when he was a nobody. Most men in his position compromised—they stayed with their wives and got around on the side. But he'd no use for that. He liked everything above board. He had left his wife—he made her a generous allowance—and he called it a day.

At this point a page appeared.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Wade."

"Damn! Who is it?"

"Mr. Markham. Says it's important."

"Hell!"

He rose, left his companion without a word, thereby setting her free to develop an eye-conversation with the Chairman of the Wine Committee, seated at a neighbouring table.

Wade picked up the receiver.

"Wade, here."

For over a minute he stood, listening. His expression registered no flicker of change and, when Markham finished, he said without pausing for reflection:

"Well, you know what you do when they go crackers, don't you? You throw them out. It isn't so simple as that? All right. Get on with it. Your affair—not mine. *What?* You want me to come round in half an hour? I can't! I've a dinner date. Well, wait a minute!"

He thought intently. Should he go, or not?

Markham had practically retired from business, but his opinion carried a hell of a punch in certain influential quarters. If he, Wade, decided to have a crack at that merger, perhaps—well, you never know.

"All right. I'll cancel my date and come. But I wouldn't do it for any one but you."

He returned to the café to find that his companion was now sitting sideways, her left elbow resting on the table, her

legs crossed. She received the news that he would have to walk out on her with greater equanimity than he had expected.

Marjorie Dawes was standing in the small sitting-room of a flat in a mews, not far from Bond Street. She had several decisions to make, and one mistake might have unpleasant consequences. Her husband would be back any minute, so she *must* decide.

Marjorie was thirty-five and although the irregular features were too bold to be rated attractive, the remarkable black eyes and a superlative figure made many men find her exciting, especially as she could be amusing and was always vital.

This flat did not belong to the Dawes. The Dawes never lived in a flat which belonged to them. The tenant of this one was the young wife of a rich elderly man who lived at Woking. She did not like hotels so wanted somewhere to stay when she managed to get to town for a few nights. She had furnished the flat—she paid the rent—and the Dawes lived in it. Every one thought it was theirs, including the elderly husband. As it consisted of only three bedrooms and a sitting-room, the Dawes stayed at an hotel when the lady from Woking came to town.

Despite the imperative need to reach a decision on her main problem, Marjorie could not restrain indignation at the fact that she was in London. If only she could have stayed another week in Milan—one extra week—she probably would never have come back! But she had not been certain, so she dared not stay, although she was half-afraid to return.

Before leaving Verna to go to Milan, she had begged Merle to tell Markham nothing about Yashvin. God, how she tried to knock some sense into her head! As to the change in her appearance, she could have told Markham that she had lived on fruit juice. Outside business, Markham was a fool. He'd believe anything.

She lit a cigarette, then inhaled the smoke deeply.

Merle *had* told that dull husband of hers. Marjorie had telephoned the Capri two or three days ago and had learned that Merle had told him everything.

That put her in—deep.

Markham knew she had left Merle and had gone to Milan.

That would need explaining to an infuriated Oliver. And much more to her husband—who would want to know if she had gone to Milan alone. So utterly stupid! *He* had been away for ten days and she didn't want to know if he'd been alone. They had enough to think about without being childish.

But the whole point was that she ought to have written to Markham from Milan. And, as she didn't write, she certainly ought to have telephoned him directly she returned to London. She had pressed for this Verna trip. She had wanted to stay at the Château Miramar. And she had cleared out, leaving Merle alone with Yashvin. Oliver certainly would want to know why. And they could not afford to fall out with him. That was certain.

A door banged below.

She threw her cigarette into the grate, then listened intently.

A minute or two later, Dawes came into the room, carrying a couple of suitcases.

She went to him swiftly.

"Listen! And think quickly! And don't talk any rubbish. We're in a jam. Don't waste time telling me I've been a fool, because I know it. But I was on a spot. Here's what's happened. Merle went absolutely cracked on a man called Yashvin. Crazy! Says she'll leave Oliver if Yashvin will have her. I talked my head off. No good. I begged her to go back to London! No good! I implored her not to tell Oliver. No good! So, as I couldn't do anything, I went to Milan."

"Did you write to Oliver?"

"No. That was my first mistake. Here's the second. I've been back some days and I haven't telephoned him, but I only knew, for certain, a couple of days ago, that Merle *had* told Oliver. They had a hell of a row. Oliver came back to London alone."

"Is Merle still at the Capri?"

"Yes."

"You haven't been clever."

"That's why you've got to be."

Dawes lit a cigarette.

All sorts of thoughts went through her mind as she stood watching him. After all, they had been through a lot together, and he was clever, and she certainly liked his

clothes. He wasn't good-looking, of course, with that nearly red hair and that almost ginger toothbrush moustache, but he had a lithe figure and keen eyes. Exciting eyes! Never still! Besides, he had taken this well. He would not have missed the possibilities of that trip to Milan, but he'd put first things first. And Oliver certainly came first. They'd had a lot out of him, and would need a lot more.

The telephone bell rang.

Dawes laughed.

"That's probably him, Marjorie. Well, he's all yours."

Then, with a quick movement, he took off the receiver, covered the mouthpiece, whispered several staccato sentences, then gave her the receiver.

"Yes? Oliver! I'm so glad! Yes, I know, I know! But do put yourself in my place. I went to Milan, hoping it would pull Merle together. But of course I didn't write to you! I'd be likely to upset you, when I was certain—absolutely certain—that directly Merle met you in Paris she'd forget all about that man. Surely you can understand my banking on that. 'Course I banked on it! Even when I telephoned Merle at the Capri two days ago and she told me you had quarrelled, I didn't believe that it was serious and I don't now. Of course I don't, Oliver. Merle spoke very affectionately about you on the telephone. I'm telling you she did. Give her a little time. It'll be all right. Of course it will! After all you've done for her! *She'll* come to her senses. What? I would have telephoned, but I thought Merle had come back. I begged her to—on the telephone. As you didn't ring me, I took it for granted she'd returned. What? He's been away for ten days. He's just come in. But of course we'll come! We'll come now! You know you can count on us. You know that, Oliver."

She put down the receiver, then gave a long whistle.

"We're out!"

She looked up at him, then added:

"You're not a bit of a fool."

"I won't have to be."

"Are things tough?"

"Very tough."

She liked the lack of emphasis in his tone. It gave her confidence.

He took her wrists in his powerful hands, then raised her to her feet.

"Did you go alone to Milan?"

"No."

The eyes narrowed for a second, then he released her and said in the same even tone.

"Fix a drink. We need one. Whatever Oliver says—stick to the script."

She put her arms round him, pressed him to her—then went to get the drinks.

The remaining person to be immediately affected by Markham's decision to disclose the facts about Merle was Harry Green, who had a flat on the sixth floor and was therefore a close neighbour. During the last two years, Merle had become increasingly friendly with this eccentric old man.

To enter Green's sitting-room was to find oneself in a former age. Not only were the furniture and decorations Victorian, but the walls were covered with signed photographs of vanished stage celebrities. There they were, ascending row upon row of them. They looked at you with tragic or frivolous features, and, as you gazed at these distinguished or lovely faces, you realised with a sobering sense of discovery that these remarkable or radiant people were all dead.

You looked at them. They looked at you. You were in a minority of one. To be alive, suddenly seemed original.

It would be difficult to say whether the realisation that all these gifted people were dead was more moving in regard to the once-eminent, such as Irving and Tree, or the wholly-frivolous—who had a much more numerous representation, as most of the photographs depicted Gaiety girls and music-hall stars in all their departed glory. It would be very difficult to say. Green's favourite was a photograph he had acquired before leaving Eton. It was inscribed to "Darling Harry" and revealed four vivacious young ladies, in a tempestuous flurry of frills, who, decades ago, had danced the can-can at an Alhambra long demolished.

Harry Green was over seventy and had been a famous figure in late Victorian and Edwardian "smart set" circles. He had never done anything except possess a large private income; go to first nights, prize fights, race meetings; wear an orchid in his buttonhole; give innumerable supper parties at fashionable Bohemian restaurants; and be the lover of lots of alluring actresses.

On this particular evening he was sitting in his armchair in front of a lively coal fire, although it was May. He had had tea over an hour ago, as a tray on the table showed. All the photographs regarded their ardent admirer, who was turning over the pages of one of his many press-cutting books, this being his favourite occupation. It was pleasant to re-read paragraphs relating how "Mr. Harry Green, the well-known sportsman" had been at this, that, or the other scene of joy—to look again at photographs of Mr. Harry Green, with the popular musical comedy actress of the day, on the deck of a house-boat; at the races; or sunning themselves at Brighton.

His morning coat, with an orchid in the button-hole, hung over a chair, it having been discarded for a remarkably ornate dressing-gown. He was alone in the flat as the woman who attended to him left in the afternoon—after leaving tea ready so that he had only to boil the water—and returned at night to prepare dinner.

Nowadays, Mr. Harry Green was well-to-do. Once, he had been wealthy, but, being generous, and having had a most expensive affair at the age of fifty with an extravagant lady—who, eventually, and fortunately, deserted him for an impecunious subaltern—Mr. Harry Green's wealth had suffered diminution.

Physically, too, he had shrunk. He was tall, fragile, rather bent. Age had sharpened features which had once been benevolently bland. The fine slightly feminine hands trembled slightly, but the china-blue eyes retained a gleam of romantic fervour. Luxuriant, ivory-white hair gave a final flourish of distinction.

Meanwhile, in his flat on the floor below, Markham was thinking about "that lunatic upstairs," and eventually decided that he would have to be told about Merle as "that madman" was expecting her to return any day. Well, Celia could tell him. She, too, would have to be told. The cook and the other maid did not matter—they were "dailies" and were leaving soon. He would send Celia up to "old Green" and, later, he would make it clear that he expected them not to talk.

He rang for Celia, told her the facts about Merle, harshly and briefly, then sent her upstairs.

Harry Green opened the front door and was delighted to find that his visitor was Celia. The presence of a pretty

woman was a psychic necessity to the old man, although women had long ceased to be a physical one. It was not uncommon for Celia to call in the afternoon, before she went out, to see if there were anything she could do for him.

"Come in, my dear, come in."

There was a slight quaver in the tone. He took her arm, piloted her to the sitting-room, was about to ask if she had come for any particular reason, when he discovered that he was confronted by a very bewildered Celia.

Markham's staccato account of the stupendous news about Merle had electrified Celia. She could not believe it. She knew that such things sometimes happened, because she read about them in the papers, but—Merle! Merle, who had always been so kind to her, whom she adored, to want to leave her husband and children!

"Mistress is going to run away with another man."

She fell into a chair, as if the sentence had knocked her off her balance, then gazed at old Green with incredulous blue eyes.

"Going to run away?"

Celia nodded, vigorously and repeatedly.

A long silence. Then, to her stupefaction, the old man collapsed with laughter.

The laughter was younger than its owner and, as Celia loved laughter, being radiantly happy, she had some difficulty not to join in.

To prevent this, she exclaimed indignantly:

"How you can sit there, laughing, I don't know! It's terrible. Everything down there seems meaningless. And you sit, rolling about, as if it were funny! You mustn't laugh when you see him."

"See him? Does he want to see me?"

"Yes. In about quarter of an hour. And we're not to say a word about this. Don't forget."

She spoke to the old man as if he were a child who had to be humoured one moment, and instructed the next.

"God bless my soul!"

Then he added in the same quavering tone:

"Sometimes, when something like this happens—you discover that you knew it would happen. I'm not surprised Merle's fallen in love with someone else. I wonder it didn't happen long ago. Yes, long ago. She's a woman. God bless my soul! It's like the old days—when women were women—and men fell in love with them."

They sat gazing at each other. She, astonished by the ways and opinions of her elders and betters and those set in authority over her; he, grateful for her young loveliness—grateful for the perfection of the blossoming figure, the dark curly hair, the animated features, the innocent blue eyes.

At last she exclaimed:

"You'd better get out of that dressing-gown! Stand up! That's right! I'll help you."

She took off the dressing-gown, fetched the morning coat, brushed it, helped him into it, then put a hand on each shoulder under the coat to ensure that it sat properly. Finally, she took the lapels and gave them an expert downward jerk.

"There! Aren't you posh? With that orchid and everything! Some people are sometimes posh—but you always are. Must be the orchid. All the same, I like violets better. You don't know how I love violets."

She picked up the tray, carried it to the kitchen, then came back and said:

"You needn't go for a few minutes. And don't laugh, whatever you do. It's a pity I can't come with you. Won't it be awful if you burst out laughing?"

She sat down and he told of romances he had known in his day. Terrific affairs! Delirious happiness! Abysmal despair! Resounding scandals!

Celia listened, round-eyed and open-mouthed.

3

Markham stood by the window, waiting for Agatha to arrive. He had an excellent view of the park, and an oblique one of Hyde Park Corner, but saw neither as his thoughts were intent on the meeting with his mother-in-law.

Eventually, he made an irritable gesture.

Agatha! What hope could he possibly have in her? She had never been the slightest use to him or to any one else. All she wanted was to hide in that Highgate flat and go to the films with Daphne. He was sick of her pretending to be an ordinary woman! Since Joyce's death, she had lived with Daphne, who had been his mistress and who, therefore, had deceived her for years. But Agatha, like all women, was capable of the most anomalous relationships. She would have denounced any other woman who had acted as she had, but evidently regarded her own action as entirely

natural. To live with her husband's former mistress ! Only women were capable of these moral somersaults. And all her jabber about Daphne resembling her ! Well, Merle, for what her opinion was worth, did *not* think they were alike. Why——

"Mrs. Joyce, sir."

He gazed at the faded Agatha, noting, with satisfaction, that she was trembling.

"I—I—don't know what to say to you, Oliver. I——"

"No. I don't suppose you do. But, as you're her mother, and as Merle wants to leave me and go off with some foreigner she met a month ago, I thought I'd better see you."

"But it's impossible ! Merle wouldn't do a thing like that ! Not Merle !"

The weak expostulatory tone, the ineffective movements of the gloved hands, intensified his irritation.

"Not Merle," she repeated.

"You think I've made it up, then ?"

"I don't know *what* to think."

"Have you any suggestions ?"

"You must talk to her, Oliver. You must, really. Whatever can she be thinking about ?"

"Well, surprising as it may seem, I *have* talked to her—without the slightest effect. You're her mother, so perhaps you can influence her."

"Oh, she won't take any notice of me ! None of them ever did—and she certainly won't. I really think it's best to do nothing. It'll probably blow over. She can't be serious. Leave the children for some man she met in Italy ! Leave the flat and all these lovely things ! Oh no ! Not Merle."

"Your advice, then, is to do nothing ? I only want to know. Merle's alone in Paris. She's offered to go to this man. If he sends for her, she *will* go. And your advice is—do nothing."

"Yes—no ! How should I know ? Why ask me ?"

He turned to her and shouted :

"Because you're her mother !"

"Well, you're her husband. That ought to count for something. Anyhow, Merle never listened to me. Never ! She didn't when I advised her not to marry you."

"You advised Merle not to marry *me* ?"

"Oh yes !" Agatha exclaimed resolutely, as if glad of

this opportunity to demonstrate her sanity. "I said to her: 'Now, whatever you do, don't marry him.' But she wouldn't listen. If I tell her not to run away with this man, she'll go. That's certain."

He stared at the faded figure, at the worn gloves, the old-fashioned hat, the silly sentimental face. This nobody had advised Merle not to marry him—Oliver Markham!

"Perhaps you'll tell me," he said in a tone tremulous with the attempt to control it, "why you didn't want Merle to marry me. I wasn't a bad catch for her—with her record, and her background."

"How should I know why I didn't want her to marry you? I just felt it would be a mistake. And it doesn't look as if I were far wrong."

"Oh well, if you put it that way, all I can say is that you evidently knew her character better than I did. You should have warned me, not Merle."

He began to pace the room in order not to look at her. God! This fool had advised Merle not to marry him! At all costs he must prevent her telling the others that.

"Listen, Agatha! You're no help—and I didn't think you would be. But this is the point: there are some people I have to tell about Merle, because, if I don't, they'll find out. They'll be here any minute—and I'll ask you not to talk about the past."

"I don't want to talk about anything."

"Tell no one about Merle, except Daphne. I suppose we must regard her as one of the family."

"Oh yes! She's one of the family. But she won't say a word. She's quiet as a mouse."

Then she added:

"Why do you want me to meet these people? What for?"

He came to a standstill. It would be better if she went. Much better. God only knew what she'd say!

"You're right. There's no point in your being here. That's certain. So you'd better go—and you'd better go now, or you'll run into them."

"I'll go at once! This minute! Tell Merle I said she mustn't do anything silly. But it will all blow over. She won't leave the children. Not the children!"

Directly she had gone, he stamped with irritation.

He'd married into a fine crowd! *Agatha* had opposed

his marriage ! For years, he had believed that she regarded him as a superior being—far removed from her suburban sphere—who had conferred inestimable benefits on her daughter and herself. He had believed that Agatha boasted to her friends about the grand match Merle had made—how she had a fine flat in the West-End—went abroad for holidays and so on. And this woman calmly told him she had advised Merle not to marry him !

The others would be here any minute.

If only he could tell them, curtly, that he had decided to wire Merle, ordering her to return immediately and that, if she did not obey, he would take instant steps to get a divorce ! But he could not do that—and he could not tell others why he could not do it. To do so, would involve explaining the extent of his isolation. It would involve revealing that his mother was Portuguese, that she had run a cheap Soho restaurant, and all the rest of it. In fact, it would involve the total destruction of everything he had presented to the world—of everything which he wanted people to think that Oliver Markham was. If he were going to destroy all that, he might as well have married Flora and published the truth about himself at the outset.

He crossed to a somewhat cumbersome piece of furniture, opened its twin doors, thereby revealing a bar in miniature. They could get what drinks they wanted and, doubtless, Wade and Dawes would need several. God ! What help could these people be ? The best he could hope for was that they'd keep their mouths shut. And then, somehow, he must get Merle back. He *must* get her back.

Voices in the hall.

Wade, Dawes, that lunatic Green, and Marjorie ! These were the people with whom he was intimate !

He greeted them brusquely, waving aside expressions of sympathy or exclamations of surprise. It maddened him to see that crazy Green in a morning coat, with the inevitable orchid, looking at him with those cracked blue eyes ! Merle *would* pick up with an eccentric dotard like him !

"Well, you all know the facts," he said in his most rasping tone, "and you needn't think I've asked you here because I want advice. I don't. What I do want to make very clear is that you are the only people who know, except Agatha, and she'll keep her mouth shut. I expect you to do the same. Whether Merle will, only God knows !"

He turned to Marjorie.

"I can understand your thinking that Merle would drop this nonsense when she met me in Paris. You were wrong, but I can understand your thinking so."

"But of course I thought so, Oliver——"

He silenced her with a quick movement, then asked:

"What kind of man is this—Boris Yashvin? It's no good my asking Merle because she says he's God."

Wade laughed noisily then said:

"Well, Oliver, you don't want advice, so I won't give any, but, if you're the man I think you are, you won't stand for your wife picking up with some tout in a foreign hotel. I think it a miracle you didn't knock hell out of her. I would have."

"What kind of a man is this—Boris Yashvin?"

"Very ordinary, Oliver. Don't imagine he's a Charles Boyer, because he isn't. He's about forty, rather short, very broad. Travelled a lot and speaks several languages, but there's really nothing to him. Still, it's only fair to say that I saw very little of him. He and Merle disappeared all day on the lake and, at night, wandered about the grounds."

"So they were always alone together?"

"Always. It was unbelievable. Why——"

"Did you find out anything about him?"

"All I could. He spends a lot of time at Verna—in the season and out of it. He's friendly with the manager and gets special terms. He's not rich. I let one of the waiters think I'd fallen for Yashvin in order to get him to talk and he said that women do go cracked about him. Which just shows you never know. Merle will have told you about his wife and child. Anyhow, you see heaps like him in foreign hotels."

Wade made a vehement gesture.

"It's the usual set-up, Oliver. He's the kind that preys on silly, bored, idle, rich women. He'll touch her for a hundred or two and then she'll wake up."

Old Green looked at each in turn, then said:

"You're talking about Merle, you know. About Merle." But Markham was still intent on Marjorie.

"You say, they were always alone together?"

"Always. I told Merle she was mad, but I really don't think she *heard* any one but him."

There was a silence. All of them were standing; only

"I'll stay here—as a visitor. Or go to Highgate—whichever you like."

"Of course you'll stay here!"

"As a visitor. My coming back doesn't mean a thing."

This exchange proved too provocative for Wade. It challenged the supremacy of husbands and, if Markham were too craven to pick up the gauntlet, Wade wasn't.

"Look here, Merle," he said offensively, "don't you think it's about time you stopped play-acting?"

She put her head a little to one side, then regarded him speculatively.

"Mr.—John—Wade. Ex-office boy. Battered a way to success by his own inimitable methods. Left his wife when he discovered that he had glamour. Mr. John Wade, who believes that his lady friends love him for himself alone, suggests that I should stop play-acting."

Then, ignoring the red-faced Wade, Merle crossed to Harry Green and said:

"Fancy you here! Still, you're not here, really."

Then, to Marjorie: "Good trip back?"

To Dawes: "I can almost hear your brain ticking. Still, perhaps you're right. This may go your way."

Then, to all of them:

"Well, this is where I came in."

She looked round the room, as if it conflicted with her memories of it, then went out, shutting the door noiselessly behind her. In the hall, she found Celia, surrounded by suitcases and two trunks. A very-astonished Celia.

"Come here, Celia."

Her voice had a caressing quality which those in the sitting-room might not have recognised.

"You'll understand, if no one else does. I'm in love—for the first time in my life. I've no choice. None! And now let's take the suitcases into the little bedroom. The trunks can wait till the morning."

Then she went on:

"I couldn't have come back if you hadn't been here. Not for a day!"

"Oh, I'm so glad you're back! You don't know how glad I am! It's been wretched the last few days."

They carried the suitcases into a small bedroom, then Merle opened one.

"Here you are," she said, as she threw several pairs of

stockings and some lingerie on to the bed. "Those are for you."

"They can't be! You're joking!"

"Of course I'm not joking. I got them for you in Paris."

Celia examined them reverently.

"I've never seen anything like these. Oh, aren't they marvellous? No one is as kind as you are. I'll put them away to-night. I won't even look at them again."

"Still in love with George?"

"So much! If you knew how much! I can't think what he sees in me."

"You can't think what he sees in you! Why, you baby, George is one of the luckiest men alive. I hope he knows it."

"You're wrong! Really, you are! I can't tell you how kind he is—how gentle."

"Does he still give you violets?"

"Oh yes. I'm so happy I don't know what to do with myself."

They went on talking while they unpacked.

It was ten o'clock when Celia went—and Merle locked the door.

CHAPTER III

ENTER RODERICK BRENT

I

FOUR days later.

Roderick Brent was standing by the window of his study at the top of a small block of flats near Baker Street. Seven o'clock had just struck. It was a serene May evening, so still, that the laburnum in the courtyard did not stir.

The study contained only essentials: a small table, on which was a typewriter, stood near the window; the lower part of the walls was hidden by bookcases; there were no pictures, and the solitary chair was a plain solid one by the table. The room had a static quality, caused partly by the silence—which was remarkable in view of the flat's proximity to Baker Street—and partly perhaps by Brent's immobility as he looked down at the courtyard, in the middle of which was a small white statue.

Brent was forty, but only a penetrating observer would

have recognised the fact, for the short hair was raven black and the features, being seldom in repose, had an animation that masked the incipient ravages of nervous energy which frequently lacked control. Brent had the psychic make-up of the artist and oscillated, therefore, between extremes. He was at rest only when he was asleep. And not always then.

A year ago, a friend had let him this flat, at the unfurnished rent. He had come here to write another book—and had finished that book yesterday.

He looked at his watch. Annie would be back any minute now. She was the best "daily" he had ever had, the result being that he had been able to devote himself wholly to his work.

The shutting of the front door, followed by footsteps in the hall, announced her return. She had just taken the typescript of his new book to the post office. He had told her not to register it and—in a note to his agent—had asked that proofs should be corrected by a professional reader as he did not want to pass them. This was the first time he had not registered a typescript; and the first time he had left the correction of proofs to a stranger. The implications of these facts were plain, but he did not want to analyse them.

It was his custom to work for a year, then go abroad and, usually, he decided long in advance which country he would visit directly he was free. His last trip had been to Germany where he had stayed nearly ten months. The trip before that had been the States. But, now, for the first time, he had no plans.

Annie evidently thought he was working, for she pushed an envelope under the door in order not to disturb him. He split it open and learned that a play he had written three years ago, which had had little success in London, was still in considerable demand with repertory and amateur dramatic societies. His agent's letter made that plain, and a "royalties" cheque pleasantly emphasised the fact. One way and another, he had enough money to do nothing for a year. That was something—it was a lot—and now he could return to the problem of deciding where to go.

Half an hour passed, without the emergence of a decision, then he heard a ring at the bell, followed almost immediately by a knock on the door.

"Come in."

"I'm sorry to disturb you."

"You're not disturbing me. What is it, Annie?"

"A Mr. Markham wants to see you."

"Markham! He doesn't know I'm here. Can't be Oliver Markham. What's he like? Tall, spare, about forty-five, odd eyes?"

"That's right. He seems upset about something."

Brent whistled. "Better show him in."

Some moments elapsed after Markham's appearance before he said, without shaking hands:

"You probably wonder why I've come."

"At the minute, I'm more interested to know how you discovered I'm here. I haven't seen you for two or three years and I've had this flat for only one."

"I found your publisher's address in Merle's address book. I went there to-day, asked a girl to re-direct a letter to you and, while she was doing it, I managed to read the address."

"You must want to see me badly."

"I do. Damned badly!"

"Better sit down. You look as if you haven't slept for nights."

Brent pushed the chair towards him, but Markham remained standing.

After a silence, he related the facts about Merle, becoming progressively indignant as he did so. He ended by saying:

"Four days ago she came back—says everything is unaltered—won't live with me as a wife—and goes on as if she were hypnotised. Refuses to meet any one. Even her mother."

He had been certain that Brent would interrupt his account of Merle's infatuation for Yashvin, consequently his silence, and his absence of astonishment, so angered Markham that he almost shouted:

"You don't seem surprised!"

"I'm not."

"You're—*not*."

"Not in the least. The only thing that surprises me is why you've come here."

"Because I'm at my wits' end. That's the only reason, I can assure you. I've tried others, but they're no good. So I've come to you. You've known her since she was

practically a child, so you ought to know her better than any one else."

"Does she know you've come?"

"No, she does not."

"I'd rather keep out of it, Markham."

"Why?"

"Instinct."

There was a long silence.

Markham had always disliked Brent, chiefly because of his peculiar association with Merle, and this reception deepened that dislike. Not a hint of surprise—not one sign of sympathy! Brent had sat on the corner of the table and listened with the impassivity of a sphinx.

Meanwhile, although Brent certainly did not want to become involved in an Oliver-Merle duel, it was difficult not to respond to Markham's helplessness. The latter's indignation had now flickered out and he stood, staring in front of him, as bewildered as a sane man in a madhouse.

"Listen, Markham. I'll come if you like, but, I warn you, I think it will go damned badly with Merle."

"Why on earth should it?"

"Well, I think it will. And I think this too. You've got to make up your mind. There's one of only two things you can do: get rid of her right away; or be prepared for a damned strange journey—to an unknown destination. It's one or the other. I know Merle pretty well. If she's in love with this man, something's happened—which none of us will be able to stop."

After a pause, he went on:

"Before I change, you'd better tell me who else knows about this. Agatha does, of course, but nothing's going to get her into the arena again. Dawes must know, as his wife went to Verna with Merle. I've met Dawes at your place. He's not a fool. Who else?"

"Wade knows. But he's about as much use as a sick headache."

"I think I've met him too. Any one else?"

"Daphne knows, of course. And one of the maids. And an old lunatic called Harry Green."

"Has a flat above yours? I remember. Last time I saw Merle, we ran into him in the lift. Hangover from the Nineties—always wears an orchid? That's the man. So he's still alive. That's because he's kept all his illusions."

Then he added :

" I'll put this away before I change."

Markham watched him brush the keys of the typewriter, then cover it with a case. Everything about Brent irritated him : the tall slim figure, the dark eyes, the restless vitality which, somehow, seemed different in kind from the energy of the men with whom Markham was familiar.

Directly he was alone, he looked round the room as if in search of additional fuel for his irritation. He stared at the books. A writer ! Theories, ideas, and a pack of nonsense ! God only knew what stuff Brent had pumped into Merle when she was a girl ! Fancy getting a living, sitting in this room week after week, making up a lot of bunkum for a crowd of idle people to waste their time with ! Markham never read a book and neither did most of the people he knew, although, oddly enough—his uncle—who was the only man who had deeply impressed him and the only one who had influenced him decisively—had been remarkably well-read and had had a magnificent library.

Brent returned, buttoning his coat.

" Well, let's go. But don't blame me if we get a hot reception. If she tells me to get out, I shall get out."

" Why you think she'll object to me bringing you into this is beyond me. It shows I'm trying to be tolerant. Why the three of us can't dine somewhere and talk the whole thing over quietly, I really cannot imagine."

" We'll see how it goes."

When they reached the flat and just as Markham was about to insert the latch-key, the door opened and Celia appeared. It was her evening off—she was meeting George—so Celia was en route for rapture and looked like it.

Brent noticed not only her slim perfection and vivacity, but also a radiant quality which surrounded her like a halo. For a moment he forgot the purpose of his visit, but was reminded of it when Markham shut the front door noisily.

A minute later, they went into the sitting-room.

Merle was sitting in a small armchair by the fireplace, looking remarkably pale, though this may have been caused by wearing a very dark suit and no make-up, except a hint of lip-stick. She must have been intent on her thoughts for their entrance effected no change in her attitude. When she did look up, she stared from one to the other in utter bewilderment.

Then she shot to her feet.

"What's this?"

"Now, listen, Merle. I thought——"

"You've brought Rod into this! Roderick Brent! This beats all the bands that have ever played. You can't bear the sight of him. You despise him and everything he represents. Not openly, of course. You never do anything openly. But you've shown by hints, sniffs, silences, just what you think of him. But, now, because your own type can't help you, you bring him into it. And, which is funnier still, he's fool enough to come."

She switched to Brent and demanded:

"What is it? Short of a plot?"

"Maybe. Anyhow, if you don't want me in this, I'll get out."

"You've got together, so you'd better stay together. It's a perfect partnership! Oliver's never been inside himself for a moment; and you've never been outside yourself for a split-second."

She collapsed into an armchair, helpless with laughter, but, eventually, as they remained silent, she looked up and asked:

"Well, where do we go from here? Surely you've a plan. Men always have a plan."

"Now, be reasonable, Merle! Why can't the three of us dine together and discuss this quietly?"

"Discuss what?"

"This Yashvin madness, of course!"

"How can we discuss Boris? Neither of you know him. I'll tell you what we'll discuss—we'll discuss ourselves. Then we'll know what we are talking about. Or shan't we?"

Then, to Brent: "Aren't you going to sit down?"

They sat down, and she went on:

"Haven't seen you for a long time. You've changed, but we can't go into that now. I'm going to tell you about our marriage. Then you'll get the background right."

"Now, Merle, do stick to the——"

"I was ill when he proposed to me. You know how ill I was. You were there all those weeks after—well—you remember. Desperately ill. I saw him, and everything else, through a mist. At last, through sheer exhaustion, I said I'd marry him. I told him I didn't love him. I knew nothing about him."

"Merle!—"

"Nothing whatever. I knew his parents were dead but that's all I did know about them, and it doesn't tell you much. I didn't know where he went to school. I didn't know whether he'd had any love affairs, or——"

"I dragged you away from a happy home! That's it, is it? So happy that you'd just tried to——"

"I knew nothing about him, Rod. Off we went for an elaborate expensive honeymoon—staying only at hotels where we were the stars. Then we came back here. Before long, he thought he wanted children. He didn't—I told him he didn't—but he thought he did. So we had Kenneth and John. They never meant a thing to him and——"

"Stop talking like a mad woman! You're going to desert the children and you have the damned nerve to say——"

"They never meant a thing to him. They were everything to me. I lived through them for years. He didn't like that. It interfered with—things. Then, because they were in the way, especially on holidays, he sent them to boarding school before I wanted them to go. Then he announced that in due course they'll go to Eton. Eton! Isn't that fun? Already, at their prep. school, they've become friendly with the boys of some decent people—the Montagues, who have a place in Devonshire. Kenneth and John spent the holidays before last there—and loved it. When they came back, they asked why we didn't live like that. Oliver never met the Montagues. I met them. I suppose he'll meet them eventually, introduce them to the Dawes and the rest of our gang, and then they'll drop us. And I shall have to tell the boys why. Still——"

"It suits you to dodge the real issue! You fall for a——"

"We haven't a home. The boys haven't a father. I haven't a husband. He hasn't a wife. We're nothing—pretending to be something. We'd have been much happier running a pub."

"You didn't care about expensive clothes, did you? You didn't like staying at the best hotels, going abroad, being a member of smart night clubs and all the rest of it, did you? You'd rather have a run-about than a Rolls, wouldn't you? You'd rather stay in town than go away at week-ends."

"We always go where he wants to go; Rod. Again and

again I've suggested going to the Atalanta Park Hotel. But, no—never! When I met him, he was always going there for week-ends, but, for some reason, he won't go there. Heaven knows why. Dawes often stays there. It's perfectly true that I took everything he wanted to give me. If you've nothing you need, you snatch everything you don't want."

"You're not a Joyce for nothing! This is how you try to justify yourself! Everything's rotten here! It's been good enough for you for twelve years. But, now, because you want to go off with some dago, you conveniently discover that you've always been unhappy here. That's pretty cheap! Suppose we get down to facts. You want to leave your husband and your children because you are crazy about some adventurer you met when you were staying at the Miramar on my money. *That's the fact.*"

"When I went to Verna, Rod, it was the first time we'd been separated for more than a couple of nights! Odd—isn't it?—if everything here was all right, that I had only to go away to see how hollow and meaningless it all is. I tell you, I haven't a husband to leave."

"For Christ's sake, talk as if you were sane! You've everything a woman could want—and a damned sight more than most dream of having. God! Any one would think I'd gone off with other women."

She began to laugh, but, this time, there was a different note in it, and one with which Brent was too familiar.

"Gone off with other women! You'll never know how funny that is, Rod. He's been faithful. I give him that. He's been faithful as—death. And he's always been absolutely certain of my fidelity. And that's a grievous burden for any wife to bear."

She leapt to her feet and faced him.

"You want a row. Yes, you *do*. Don't lie! You did everything you could to have a row at the Capri. I'll be nearer, if we have a row. That's what you think. You're determined to drag me down. Yes—you—are! You can't bear to see me happy, for the first time in my life. The first time in my life, d'you hear? It maddens you. You'd do anything to destroy it. You brought Rod because you knew it would make me furious. And that's what you wanted. You——"

"Merle, I——"

"Oh for the sake of God and all his angels, don't try the injured suffering husband pose! The martyr, trying to be magnanimous! I could stand anything till you boasted of your fidelity. You know I've loathed our sexual relations—loathed them for years. But you went on with them—practically every night. You didn't care tuppence about all the things I had to do first, and afterwards—when you were lying on your back, smoking a cigarette."

"Haven't you any decency?"

"None! Till I met Boris. If I'd had any decency, all this would have been blown sky-high long ago. And here's something else you can get straight. I'm standing no more blackmail about the boys. You divorce me. I'm not living with you as a wife again, whatever happens, so you can get a divorce on that. Then you can marry someone else. It will be—interesting—to see what she's like. Then you can send the boys to Eton. Then you'll be all right. You will have a woman to sleep with—you will drink about ten whiskies a day—go out with the Dawes—dine with Wade. That's all you want—plus pretending that you're quite a different person from the one you really are. If you've any sense, you'll marry a big, buxom barmaid—send the boys to a secondary school—and be yourself at last."

"You're out of your mind!"

"All right! I'm out of my mind. So divorce me. No need to bother about Boris. He doesn't come into this. I'm leaving here to-morrow and I'm not coming back. You can get a divorce on that."

"Oh so you're leaving, are you? And what will you live on?"

"You can't frighten me, Oliver. You're 'afraid. I'm not."

"Now, look here, Merle! Put on your things and the three of us will go out and dine. Then we——"

"Go—out—to—dine?"

Her head went back and she began to laugh. It grew louder and louder; shriller and shriller. It was like some one laughing in another world. In a terrible world.

She rushed from the room.

First one door banged, then another. Soon a loud silence filled the flat.

"I'm going to her."

"I shouldn't, Markham."

"Can't leave her, in that state! She might do any thing."

"Go, if you like. All hell will break loose if you do."

A few minutes later:

"*You* go to her. I can't stand this another minute!"

"All right. But it would be much better to leave her alone."

2

Brent opened the door so quietly that some moments passed before she became aware of his presence. He stood near the door, looking at her. Merle had flung herself face downwards on the bed and was trembling as if she had a rigor.

Suddenly sensing that someone was in the room, she raised herself quickly on her elbow, then, seeing it was Brent, she relapsed into her former attitude.

He sat down, near the bed, lit a cigarette and waited.

As the silence continued, it seemed to him that all they had experienced together was binding them with invisible threads. Their meetings had always been related to emergency, on one level or another, and this fact not only conferred a unique quality on their shared memories, but also gave emphasis to each new encounter.

As the minutes passed and she neither spoke nor moved, the room became shadowy with visions of the Merle he had known:—the sixteen-year-old Merle of their first meeting; the motionless shroud-like Merle, after her attempted suicide; the white statuesque Merle who had stood at the altar with Markham; and, now, this new Merle, who had passed through a flame which had consumed every loyalty and created one fanatical allegiance—this new Merle, who bore the signature and the seal of transfiguring experience.

At last she rose, crossed to the dressing table, then stood looking at her reflection.

"Why did you come? The real reason?"

"Because he looked so damned helpless."

He explained how Markham had discovered his address, then went on: "I told him if you'd really fallen in love with this man——"

"Really fallen in love!"

She went to a small armchair opposite him, sat down, then said slowly:

"I know it sounds mad to say that Boris is God. But he is God. He is to me. You've known me for years and you can see, can't you? Can't you?"

She raised her face for inspection.

"I can see that you're never going to be the Merle he wants you to be. She's gone for good. Any fool can see that. But you'll waste time if you think any of them are going to understand. And you may as well get this straight too. The fact that you're not sexually crazy on Yashvin only makes it worse. They'd have been able to understand sex. You're going to be alone, Merle. As to Oliver, you married him in a trance, but he didn't know that, and it lasted twelve years, so, naturally, he thinks you're demented. His pride will make him think so. But the point is this: what are you going to do?"

"I've no choice."

"I didn't ask whether you've any choice. I asked what you're going to *do*."

"Go to him—directly he sends for me. That may not be for some months but, directly things are arranged, he'll send for me."

"And till then?"

"I'm going to a one-room flat in Chelsea to-morrow. If I stay here, there will be nothing but rows. If I went to mother, he'd make her responsible for everything before a month was up. Besides, you know how hopeless she is. But she'll let me have any money I want."

Almost immediately she went on:

"Get him to divorce me. If Boris didn't exist, I couldn't come back here. There's someone who won't let me."

"What on earth does that mean?"

"There's someone who won't let me. Someone who's dead."

"Now you can cut that! I suppose you mean your father. You're a damned sight too psychic. I've told you again and again that you ought to have been a medium. Any one has only to look at your eyes to see that. So we won't bother about people in the other world. From the look of things, we're going to have quite enough trouble with the ones in this one. Where were we?"

"I want you to get him to divorce me."

"Well, I don't think he will. Not even if you go to

Yashvin. There's some mystery about him. God knows what it is, but it's there all right. If he were what every one thinks he is, you'd be out by now. And he certainly wouldn't have come to me. By the way, why on earth does he want to send the boys to Eton ? "

" Because he didn't go."

" I see. Tradition—in reverse."

Then he went on :

" I've often meant to ask you—what did your father say when you told him you were going to marry Markham ? "

" I don't believe he *heard*. For the last few years of his life, he was crazy about Daphne. Absolutely crazy ! He'd have lived with her—if she'd let him. I'll tell you this too—Daphne died when he did. Only her ghost lives with mother."

" Is that why they get on so well ? "

" Probably. But don't dive into all that. You'll never come up if you do. Never ! "

There was a long silence, then she said, as if she were continuing her thoughts aloud :

" I'm free when I'm with him. Whole ! There aren't any problems—any difficulties. Everything seems inevitable. It doesn't matter what we do, or where we go, or what we say, or if we don't say anything. It's not happiness. It's joy. You wake in the night and say to yourself : ' I shall see him to-morrow.' When I think of my life before I met him, it's like watching a sleep-walker. When I'm with him, the tiniest thing seems marvellous."

It was some moments before she went on, in the same soliloquizing tone :

" We spent whole days on the lake, or exploring the less known ones. It's magical. It pulses with peace and, at night, you're circled by silence. You see the lake even when you shut your eyes. Its mood moulds yours. Sometimes it's tremulous silver ; sometimes green glittering opal. Sometimes the sky's cerulean blue, but, more often, it's heat-grey. You wander about the little towns on the steep shores, with tiny streets of innumerable steps, dizzily poised over the lake. Shadows quiver, as if they're alive, and there are flowers everywhere."

After a silence, she went on :

" He knows every one—the peasants, the children—every one. They all come crowding round him. They tell

him about themselves and he tells them about himself. He makes them as free as he is. What frightens me is that, already, my memories seem like a dream. We used to climb the hillside at Bellagio, then sit in the grey-green glimmer of olives and look at the lake and distant mountains. Or we'd go to Maggiore, with its green water and islands, like great baskets of flowers. The banks are covered with vines, mulberries, figs, pomegranates. It's all like a dream. And so is Garda, with its sheer red rocks, and white-pillared terraces of lemon orchards. I'm terrified that, soon, I shall think it all *was* a dream. I can't believe that the Miramar is still there—that the first thing people see when they get up is the lake, and that at night the grounds are plush darkness and the silence is alive. I can't believe it!"

She turned, looked at him, as if she had just remembered his presence, then asked:

"Have you been to the Italian Lakes?"

He burst out laughing.

"If I had, I wouldn't have interrupted you. No, I haven't been, though I know Italy fairly well—or I did when I was twenty. Each Italian city has its own colour. Florence is green-and-grey; Verona is peach-coloured; Pisa's white-and-gold; and Siena is red—and half as old as Time. But that's enough about Italy. You're in London now and, one way and another, you're in for a hell of a time . . . Are you listening?"

"Do *you* believe Boris is what I think he is?"

"Would I have believed Moses if he'd told me about the Burning Bush? Talk sense, Merle! What does it matter what Yashvin is really like? What does it matter whether the Voices heard by Joan of Arc were a delusion? Only *effects* are important. If thinking that the earth is flat makes the earth miraculous, then you'd better go on thinking it's flat. An element of illusion enters into all our beliefs. And an illusion, like everything else, is known by its fruits. And lack of illusion is known by—lack of fruits."

"I said you'd altered."

"No sniping, Merle. Shoot on the target—and the target's Oliver. I don't want to talk about myself."

"*What?* You don't want to talk about yourself! It must be the end of the world. Ever since I've known you, you've been permanently drunk with yourself! God! How you talked!"

"Well, I don't want to talk about myself nowadays."

"Nor your books?"

"No."

"But you can't mean——"

"It doesn't matter what I mean. It happens to every one sooner or later, and it's happened to me. That's enough! Now, tell me: are you really clearing out to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Do I go on seeing him—if he wants me to?"

"I can't stay with him! He makes me hate him when I'm with him. When I'm not with him, I pity him as I've never pitied any one. If only this had happened to *him*. I'd have let him go. I know I would! . Anyhow, all this would have exploded if Boris had never been born. It maddens me when he talks about the boys! Their only chance is for this to break up. And, anyhow, they'll probably both be killed in the next war."

After a long silence, she asked:

"Don't you think it odd that he's never told me anything about his parents, or where he went to school, or anything?"

"Yes, it's odd. Still, there were certain things in Dickens's boyhood which he never told his wife and children. They discovered them, after his death, when they read Forster's biography. I suppose we all have our secrets—and the heart knows its own bitterness. But what really bewilders me is: why did he want to marry you? Damn it all, he knew Joyce pretty well, and he knew your background! What did he expect? The miracle is that it lasted twelve years. Anyhow, for the love of heaven don't keep telling him there's no sex in your relations with Yashvin. He'd much rather there were."

"Are you *certain*?"

"Certain! He'd be jealous, of course. He'd be jealous as Othello, who, incidentally, wasn't in the least in love with Desdemona. If you'd had an affair with Yashvin, Oliver would have a rival to fight. Now he hasn't. No one can regard God as a rival. You're trying him pretty high, you know. Especially as he wants you more, physically, than he ever did. Any one can see that by the way he looks at you."

"He never loved me, or any one else, for a single second!"

"Probably not. All the same, he's as lonely as a miser. In fact, he's like a miser in more ways than one. And yet he could have been perfectly happy with a certain type of woman."

"Which type?"

"You weren't so far wrong when you said that he ought to marry a big, buxom barmaid."

"D'you know what's the matter with him, Rod? He's made a lot of money—and it's isolated him. It's just the same with Wade. They'd both have been perfectly all right if they'd never had more than a thousand a year."

"Well, there it all is. You are what you are. He is what he is. So the stage is set. And I hope my final exit comes before the last curtain."

"You'll get something out of it. You always do—and you will out of this."

"Maybe. All the same, I'm not staying in it unless you say you want me to."

"Well, I do want you to."

"Now, isn't that logical!"

"Sometimes I think, Rod, that you're the most loathsomely cunning person in the whole world."

"Don't you believe it! A simple, sunny, boyish nature! I say, Merle! D'you remember that week-end, at Highgate, when Joyce turned up with that dreary old drunkard who said he was a reincarnation of Oliver Cromwell? D'you remember Agatha's face when he pointed at her and shouted: 'Rid me of that bauble?'"

He reminded her of other riotous rows caused by Joyce, exaggerating their ludicrous aspect, and so revealing them in a comic perspective which they had certainly lacked at the time. Soon, Merle was laughing. Soon, she was reminding him of stormy occasions which, in retrospect, lost dramatic emphasis and seemed wholly ridiculous. To an eavesdropper, all this would have been meaningless but, to them, the recalling of these shared experiences made the past more real than the present and, therefore, lessened the tension of Merle's mood.

"It would have spoiled it all, Merle, if we had thought we were in love with each other. But we didn't. We were too passionately concerned with other things and, incidentally, we were too unhappy."

After a silence he exclaimed:

"Do you know it's nearly half-past nine! I'll have to go back to him. He'll wonder what on earth we've been talking about. I never thought I'd be sorry for him, but I am. Our world is an asylum to him. And his is to us. Which is why you were crazy to marry him. Anyway, do I come to Chelsea to report—assuming he wants to go on seeing me?"

"Of course. But I'm not seeing many people. Old Green perhaps. And Celia."

"Who's Celia?"

"One of the maids. A darling."

"Then she must be the one I saw when I came in. Young, very pretty, radiant about something?"

"That's Celia. She's only nineteen. She's been madly in love with George for two years. George is a bus conductor."

"Does she know about all this?"

"Yes, she knows."

"Well, I'll go back to him. And you'd better get to bed. Give yourself a chance, Merle."

He went towards the door, then turned abruptly, and came back to her.

"What is it?" she asked.

He put a hand on each of her shoulders, made her face him, then said:

"No tricks, Merle!"

"You don't think I'd do—that—again?"

"Never mind what I think. You're going to promise."

"I promise."

"Bless you."

When he entered the sitting-room, he discovered that Markham had drunk too much whisky to have any Greenwich ideas on the question of time. Brent gave a very brief summary of his talk with Merle, but Markham's only comment was that he'd get her back. Whether she went to Chelsea, or whether she went to Yashvin—he'd get her back.

Brent left him, went into the hall, then stood looking round.

The hall was as big as a good-sized room and, for the first time, he noticed a baby grand standing in a corner. He stared at it. He knew Markham had furnished this flat some months before marrying Merle, consequently none of the furniture represented her choice. Markham had bought

that piano—and put it in the hall ! He had thought that a baby grand was a thing to have—so there it was. Merle did not play, so it had probably remained silent from the day of its purchase. It was a show piece. And Brent began to wonder just how many show pieces there were in Markham's life.

He was still wondering, when the front door opened and Celia appeared, looking like bliss personified.

He went over to her.

"You're Celia, aren't you ? My name's Brent. There's been a devil of a row here and——"

"A row !"

"Surely that doesn't surprise you. Anyhow, there has been. I think you'd better go to her."

"Oh yes, of course !"

"And if you could get her to eat something, so much the better. I don't think Mr. Markham wants anything."

"I'll go to her at once. Can't understand people being unhappy !"

"That's because you've been out with George."

"She told you, then."

"She told me."

"It was marvellous !"

He watched her hurry away, then said :

"There goes 'glad confident morning.' And it's the only thing worth tuppence."

A moment later, the front door closed noiselessly behind him.

CHAPTER IV

SOLILOQUY IN SOHO

IT WAS a velvet-dark night with a few spacious stars. Directly Brent found himself in the street, he discovered that he was hungry and decided to go to a Soho café which remained open all night and which would probably be empty at this hour. He had plenty to think about and wanted to be alone.

The front part of the café consisted of a bar and several small tables where incalculable-looking foreigners either hastily swallowed coffee, or discussed confidential affairs with low-toned volubility. There was a room at the back, screened by a curtain, where light meals could be obtained at all hours and, as Brent had expected, it was almost deserted.

He had some excellent macaroni, delicious brie cheese, then ordered black coffee and lit a cigarette.

Somewhat to his surprise, his thoughts centered in Markham rather than Merle but he soon recognised the reason for this. There was mystery in Markham, whereas the only mystery about the tautly-strung Merle was her marriage to a man with whom she had no vestige of affinity. Merle had reverted to type ; but Markham was acting out of character to an extent which challenged all former conceptions of him.

Till to-night, Brent had never doubted that Markham was what he seemed—an insensitive, self-made, purse-proud business man, who had married Merle only because desire had overwhelmed judgment. Brent had been certain of this and every meeting with Markham had confirmed that certainty. Now, he knew he was wrong, and this knowledge excited his detective instinct. Were Markham the man he had so successfully represented himself to be, he would settle this Merle—Yashvin affair, one way or the other, in five minutes.

Brent poured out some more coffee.

He was confronted by an enigma of personality—by a psychological detective problem—and all his considerable knowledge of such mysteries began to mobilise round this particular case. He decided to study the facts about Markham in the hope of discovering clues.

The dominant fact was Markham's determination to get Merle back at all costs and on any terms, for this revealed a wider and deeper dependence on her than one would have suspected. Brent, who was expert in emotional complexities, thought he discerned something of a miser in Markham. If he were right, Markham must be isolated to an extent never imagined by any one, for misers of all kinds are almost always persons isolated by circumstances or by temperament.

On the background of this hypothesis, a number of seemingly unrelated facts attained relevance. Perhaps this accounted for Markham's intimacy with rootless people like Dawes and Wade. Perhaps it explained why he had no vital contacts with any one, not even with his own children. Secrecy, of course, is the distinguishing characteristic of the miser, and Markham had certainly been secretive about his parents, his boyhood, and the life he had lived before marrying Merle. And why was it that Markham seemed

utterly unconvincing when he attempted the rôle of husband and father in argument with her ?

Brent lit another cigarette.

But there were mysteries even more perplexing than these. Why did Markham want to send the boys to Eton ? Surely he must recognise how incongruous that would be with his general social environment. He had had no reply to Merle's gibes on the subject. Did his silence indicate some obscure secret ambition ? Perhaps there was a relation between the Eton project and the presence of that piano in the hall !

But the supreme mystery was—why had Markham come to him ? Why did he imagine that he would be able, or willing, to help ? Brent had no delusions about Markham's opinion of him and the tribe to which he belonged—and he knew precisely what he thought about Markham and the tribe to which *he* belonged. Any idea of association between them was absurd. Merle had not exaggerated much when she had said that Markham had never been inside himself for a moment and that he, Brent, had never been outside himself for a split-second. They were not two men, they were two worlds. What could they possibly say to each other ? Anyhow, it was insolence for Markham to assume that he, Brent, would help to heal a marriage which he had always regarded as an act done by Merle when she was walking in her sleep.

He gave a short laugh.

"If we do meet, there will be some straight talking, sooner or later."

He put his cigarette out, then slowly filled a pipe.

Was he really going to be sucked into this Merle-Markham vortex ? And why did something deep in him welcome the possibility : and why did something deeper shrink from it ? Was he to tell Markham that, whatever happened, Merle was lost to him ? Lost, by reason of her realisation that she had never belonged to him for a single second. Yashvin, already, had achieved that—and it would remain if Yashvin died to-morrow.

As to Merle, Brent's difficulty was to be objective. They had experienced too much together, at too plastic an age. She was inextricably entwined with stormy memories and, especially, with that period of youthful passionate revolt when he had first felt the stirrings of an artist within him.

Merle had been his sole companion during the battle with his parents, who had been bitterly opposed to his determination to become a writer. She had been his sole companion during that outward conflict—and during the inner conflict caused by the mysterious emergence of mysterious creative power. This first inner conflict is known to most artists, for, in youth, nearly every artist is dominated by the demands of psychic energy which frequently finds outlet in volcanic revolt, because it has not yet attained discipline—the discipline imposed by dedication to a medium.

There is psychic possession as well as physical, and Brent possessed Merle psychically during those early meetings. Only she would listen—and she paid the penalty, for Brent talked like a man demented. Being concerned only with the forces seething within him, everything he said was really an argument with himself, to such an extent that he frequently forgot her presence and consequently ignored the possible effect on her of his chaotic outpourings.

This was the formative period of their intermittent relations. For Brent, it was not only a unique period, but Merle was inalienably associated with this first revolt against the ring of circumstance which usually confines the artist from the outset—and which usually continues to confine him to the end, no matter what his success or achievement may be. It is this first revolt which scars memory, for it is the most passionate and the most blindly contested.

It came back now as he sat in this Soho café and the image of Merle as a girl also returned. She had been the first to have faith in him, and gratitude for anything that had happened since was pale compared with the great glow created by the memory of a girl's blind belief.

It was difficult, therefore, to be objective regarding her. She was part of his life, just as he was part of hers, consequently he could not view her impartially even in a situation—like the Yashvin one—from which he was excluded. They had been young together, unhappy together. So, whenever they met, ghosts gathered round them.

Nevertheless, he had one long-established belief about her and he examined it now in the hope that it would illuminate her sudden and overwhelming infatuation for Yashvin.

As Brent saw it, it was impossible to exaggerate Joyce's influence upon Merle. No daughter could have been

unaffected by such a father, but the impact of his personality on a "psychic" being like Merle was incalculable. Not only had she been familiar from earliest childhood with rows of remarkable intensity, but, owing to the whim which induced Joyce to bring all kinds of people to the Highgate flat, she had met a most miscellaneous collection of spiritual and physical outcasts. It follows that she had heard conversations of all kinds on every sort of subject. Above all, she had oscillated between contemptuous loathing for her father and a devotion no less passionate. She had understood him too well not to experience these conflicting emotions, and the fact that she *had* understood him was indicative of her own nature.

In many lives there is a "fate-figure" and Joyce certainly was the fate-figure in Merle's. Consequently any attempt to understand her necessitated an understanding of him, but this was a task of baffling difficulty, for the paradoxical and elusive Joyce evaded all attempts to reduce him to a formula. Joyce had a protean personality. His wife, Agatha, and his mistress, Daphne, had such divergent memories of him that it seemed doubtful if they related to the same man.

Brent had often regretted that he had met Daphne on only two occasions, when others were present, but he especially regretted it now, for he was convinced that she had a unique conception of Joyce, and one which might illuminate the precise nature of his influence upon Merle.

Still, he had his own theory about Joyce, derived from contacts with him, and from countless conversations with Merle about her enigmatic father.

Reduced to essentials, Brent's theory was that Joyce suffered from a kind of mental malaria—which accounted for the intermittent nature of his outbreaks. Suddenly, at irregular intervals, Joyce lost all control over his "earthquake" emotional nature. Drinking bouts were the most obvious sign of these inner disturbances and it was perhaps significant that, during the intervals between them, he did not touch alcohol.

In Brent's belief, the cause of his "insanity" was his subconscious awareness of the chaos of the modern world. Joyce was emotionally aware of the cruelty, the lust, the insanity of the age and, suddenly, this emotional volcano erupted. Plenty of people experience something of the

kind nowadays, but it was the intensity of Joyce's anarchy which made it abnormal.

Joyce was a poet without a theme ; a Columbus without an America to discover. He could tilt only at windmills, but he certainly tilted at them. Not finding an opponent comparable in any degree with the rebellion within him, Joyce directed his fury against familiar surroundings.

As Brent saw it, Joyce was the most frustrated idealist ever born. What he longed for was a totally transformed life—a new humanity. Consequently, the spectacle of the old familiar faces—the humdrum routine of a régime which he knew was doomed—literally maddened him. So he made hell of his home. He had to hit something, and he hit what was nearest. And he picked up with all kinds of outcasts simply because they represented revolt.

That, in broad outline, was Brent's theory about Joyce—and the more he examined it the more convinced he became that Merle resembled her father even more than he had believed. Her wholesale rejection of all normal values in this Yashvin affair—the exaggeration of regarding him as God—were remarkably reminiscent of Joyce.

None the less, Brent recognised that his theory omitted as much as it enclosed. Between outbreaks, Joyce's many gifts functioned freely. He had made a good deal of money, although this had been materially augmented, sometime before his death, by a substantial sum left him by an aunt who had resolutely refused to meet him for many years. Also, Brent's theory failed to account for the buffoonery in which Joyce indulged during normal periods, though this might have been a substitute for action. Buffoonery, in Brent's belief, is either an aping of activity ; or it represents a nonentity's despairing attempt to attract attention. Above all, Brent's theory certainly did not explain the paradoxical fact that, soon after Merle's attempted suicide, Joyce suddenly became blissfully at peace for the first time in his life.

He stretched, then looked round the café.

He had been too engrossed in his speculations to remember surroundings, but he now noticed that several of the tables were occupied. Theatre audiences were evidently out.

He ordered more coffee, lit a cigarette, then came to a decision.

He would stay in London for a fortnight. If by the end of that time he had heard nothing from Markham, he would go abroad. He did not know where—and he certainly did not care.

And now, before he walked home, he would visualise the other members of the cast in the Markham—Merle drama.

First, there was Agatha, but she would not play a prominent rôle, for the adequate reason that she was incapable of one. She would interpret Merle's infatuation in terms of Joyce's malign influence and, as her dominant desire was to banish all memories of the husband who had made life a nightmare, she would isolate herself from everything calculated to remind her of him. Daphne too, for vastly different reasons, would also remain in the background.

Next, there was Dawes. Although Brent had met the major on only two or three occasions, he had been impressed by a quality which eluded analysis. A man did not have those eyes for nothing. Also, behind Dawes's casual-seeming manner, one sensed no ordinary ability. Dawes lived by his wits and, the way the world was going, he would need all those wits in order to survive. And Dawes doubtless had every intention of surviving. Markham was rich. Markham was confronted by a situation demanding gifts he did not possess. Dawes might see possibilities. A permanent break between Markham and Merle might suit Dawes. Anyhow, it would be interesting to watch him.

Wade probably would not count a lot. Wade, being without imagination of any kind, made the fatuous assumption that others were like himself. He would therefore advise Markham to act as he would do if he were in Markham's position—without realising that he could never be in Markham's position.

There remained Harry Green and Celia. Neither was negligible in view of the fact that they were the only persons Merle wanted to see after her departure for Chelsea, but, apart from this, it was clear that a friendship had developed between her and old Green during the last few years, so, possibly, the influence of the old romantic could not be ignored. As to Celia, the presence of this young girl, rapturously in love, must have been a daily reminder to Merle of a flowering she had never known.

Finally, there was Boris Yashvin—the spark which had kindled the heap of gunpowder. There were two certainties

about him : he was not what Merle believed him to be ; on the other hand, he must possess remarkable qualities. Merle had met too many men, of all types, to be hypnotised by a cheap adventurer. Markham could believe Yashvin was no more than that, if he liked, but it was self-delusion. A cheap adventurer would not have created fanaticism in Merle.

Brent summoned the waiter, handed him a note, then took his hat from the rack.

While he waited for change, a new thought came to him, and claimed him so completely that he stood motionless, exploring it. His concentration was such that several people glanced at this man who remained totally unaware of them.

Why was Merle doing everything in her power to compel Markham to divorce her immediately ?

The question challenged his imagination.

Why did she want a final break with Markham before she knew Yashvin's decision ? By refusing to live with Markham she was giving him grounds for divorce which were independent of her future relations with Yashvin.

Why ?

She had said to Markham :

" All right ! I'm out of my mind. So divorce me. No need to bother about Boris. He doesn't come into this."

On her return to London she had refused to live with Markham as a wife. Now, she was refusing to remain under the same roof with him. She was goading him to divorce her on an issue which ignored Yashvin's future actions.

Why ?

He found no answer, but he sought one so intently that he started when the waiter appeared with his change.

He left the café, then stood irresolute on the pavement.

Merle had said that he would get something out of this. Well, already, it had enabled him to postpone a decision about going abroad. Also, he was delivered from the necessity of confronting a personal problem which had emerged during the writing of his book.

" I hope Markham *does* want to see me again. If I get into this, I shan't be able to think about anything else."

The moon had risen. Brent walked slowly home through shadow-patterned streets.

Part II—Vortex

CHAPTER I

VISITORS FOR MARKHAM

I

MERLE had gone to Chelsea. She refused to see Markham and had written, urging him to divorce her immediately. The letter was on the table.

Those were the facts, but they seemed unreal as he stood in the sitting-room, looking out of the window and seeing nothing. One thought circled in his mind: It was about ten days since he had gone to Paris to meet her.

"About ten days."

He repeated the words several times, in the expectation that repetition would give substance to their meaning, but the more he tried to realise the rapidity of the events which had brought catastrophe, the more grotesque it seemed that only a few days separated him from seeming security.

He turned, looked round the room, glanced at his watch, then, almost immediately, glanced at it again. Three o'clock. What was he going to do all this afternoon—and all this evening?

But his bewilderment was too extreme to allow concentration on any one subject. Markham suddenly found himself in a region as removed from his conception of reality as a madhouse, with the result that he could control his thoughts no more than he could control events. He watched both. Above all, and the effect of this was devastating, he could not act—and his life had consisted of action. He had always known what he had wanted and had gone out confidently to get it. Now, he had lost everything he valued and had no idea how to regain it. Having no objective, his mind lacked boundaries, consequently thoughts roamed in and out like poachers.

For instance, apropos of nothing, he suddenly saw Flora, sitting on the edge of an armchair, her face half-hidden by her hands, rocking slightly to and fro. And, to his greater amazement, he discovered that he wished to God she were actually there. What had happened to her had now

happened to him. *He* had been deserted—abruptly, brutally. *His* world was in ruins. Flora would understand. Others did not, because it was outside their experience.

Then, also apropos of nothing, he found he was thinking of his uncle—the uncle who had appeared after his mother's death—to whom he owed everything. For the first time, he fully realised how fundamentally this man had influenced him. It was he who had made him ashamed of his mother—ashamed of their life in that Soho restaurant. It was he who had compelled him to see what a fool his father had been to marry an obscure Portuguese girl.

Marmaduke Markham.

And, a year or two before his death, *Sir* Marmaduke Markham.

He had never criticised his brother in words for marrying a nobody, but his attitude and the whole manner of his life made such an act seem unutterably vulgar and incredibly stupid. Simply by being what he was, he outlawed folly more effectually than any formulated indictment could have done. To be in Marmaduke Markham's presence was to realise the social privileges which his brother had thrown away by marrying out of his race and out of his class.

He had a great house on the Chelsea Embankment with a spacious view over Battersea Park. He had a place in Dorset. He had been educated at Eton and Oxford. Not only was he the embodiment of the tradition which these things represent, but he had great business ability. He was hard, shrewd, slow to reach decisions, inflexible once they were made. He had commanding presence, absolute self-confidence, and instinctive certainty in the rectitude of his 'code.' In subordinates, what he demanded was ability and cared nothing about the class of the man possessing it. He was wholly practical, just, capable of admitting an error on the infrequent occasions when he committed one. He was a childless widower and, seemingly, entirely self-sufficient. He was widely read in three languages and a student of seventeenth century painting.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the fifteen-year-old Markham was immensely impressed. With one stride, he went from Soho squalor to the world of Marmaduke Markham. Even the basement of the great Chelsea house created awe, especially the enormous kitchen with its high ceiling and its huge dresser. A long passage led from it to

the servants' hall. In a pantry, one caught a glimpse of an aristocratic butler in a baize apron. As to the dining-room, drawing-room, and library, the fifteen-year-old Markham regarded these Aladdin-like wonders with incredulity.

Subsequent experience served only to deepen his admiration, for it revealed the remarkable ability of this man who had appeared from the void to befriend him. This ability was different in kind from Wade's, whose success was that of a gangster operating just inside the law. One way and another, therefore, Marmaduke soon represented everything worthy of emulation and although Markham realised that he could never resemble his uncle, who seemed perpetually remote from the possibility of folly, the determination to present a travesty of him became deeply rooted.

If Marmaduke had died when Markham was thirty, he would have married Flora. He was certain of this now, as he stood by the window, looking down at the park, but seeing the past. Yes, he would have married Flora, had it not been for an ideal implanted by Marmaduke which had attained such strange growth in such alien soil. But, to have married her, would have been a repetition of his father's social suicide. It would have involved the abnegation of every value inculcated by his uncle's influence. It would have involved surrendering what he wanted to be for what he was.

He turned from the window and began to pace slowly to and fro.

Marmaduke had not only accepted Merle, he had been friendly with her. She had been one of the very few people he had asked to see just before he died. He liked her appearance, despite its somewhat spectacular quality, but above all she amused him—and that fact became increasingly precious as age tightened its toils. Naturally, he did not meet Joyce and was told nothing about him. He assumed that the boys would be sent to a great public school and this was the chief reason why Markham had decided to send them to Eton. But the supreme fact was that Marmaduke *had* accepted Merle, for it confirmed Markham's belief in her unique suitability. And—now—it made him deeply determined to get her back.

Then, as he continued to pace the room, it occurred to him that if he did *not* get her back, it would not be easy to find another Flora.

But at this point the telephone bell rang.

Agatha !

Directly he heard her voice, he became angry. Nowadays, Markham welcomed anger for it not only convinced him of Merle's perfidy, but also conferred spurious vitality.

Agatha announced apathetically that she was coming to see him ; that she wouldn't keep him long ; that there were certain things he ought to know, and something she had to say.

He put down the receiver.

There was a change in her tone, which he could not define but which increased his irritability.

He had always resented her dowdy appearance, which seemed a reflection on his importance, but he particularly resented it this afternoon. In she came, wearing a drab dress and a nondescript hat. There she stood, constantly fumbling with her confounded gloves !

" Have you seen that daughter of yours ? "

" I've seen her," she replied, regarding him as if he were a dose of peculiarly repellent medicine.

" Well ! "

" She seems quite comfortable in that little flat."

" Good God ! Is that all you have to tell me ? "

" I thought you'd be glad to hear she's comfortable as you're so fond of her. Not that it's much use your being fond of her, because she won't come back. She's been to see the boys and—"

" I don't want chatter ! You're her mother and——"

" If you don't want to hear about your sons, you don't, but it seems queer to me."

" Oh well, go on, go on ! So she's seen the boys ! Did she tell them that their mother has left home and is going off with a foreigner ? "

" No. Not yet. Kenneth and John are very excited because the Montagues want them to spend the summer holidays with them in Devonshire. They seem mad to go. Merle told them they could, unless you objected, which she didn't think was very likely."

" All right, then ! The boys are spending their holidays with the Montagues ! ' And now perhaps you'll tell me whether you tried to make Merle see that she's behaving like a mad woman."

" How many more times do I have to tell you that I've no

influence with Merle? No more than I had with her mad father. She gets more like him every day and I told her so, though she didn't like it. I've no influence with her and I've no one to discuss this with. Not even Daphne. She's——"

"I don't want to hear about Daphne!"

Then, almost shouting: "I suppose you had some reason for coming, didn't you?"

"Well! I'm not surprised she left you. I said to her: 'Perhaps you see, now, I was right when I told you not to marry him.' But she didn't say anything. She's got that man on the brain. She's exactly like her father. When he got something into his head, he could talk about nothing else. The best thing you can do is to divorce her. That's what she wants—and that's what you'd better do."

"So that's your advice, is it? And what—precisely—do you think she'll live on if I divorce her?"

"Oh, that reminds me! Merle says that, when she told you she was leaving, you asked what she'd live on. I said to her: 'What about the money your father left you?' She said you hadn't mentioned that—and she'd forgotten it."

"I see. You think I'm trying to cheat her!"

"I don't know what you're trying to do. All I know is that you didn't mention her own money, when she said she was going to leave you. She isn't penniless and I told her so. And I came here to remind you that she's money of her own."

Then she added:

"I did what I could for you. I told her she was a fool to think she'd find happiness. No woman does. Not for long. She might just as well come back and make the best of a bad job. That's what I told her, but she wouldn't listen. She thinks this other man's different. Different! She might just as well stay in the frying pan. She knows the worst about that, and she doesn't know what the fire's like—yet."

She glanced at him disparagingly, then looked critically round the room. After which, she went—without troubling to say good-bye.

Directly he was alone, he stamped furiously.

She despised him! That's why her manner had changed. She was ultra-feminine and therefore contemptuous of any man who failed to hold a woman—and sentimentally sympathetic with any woman who failed to hold a man, because she had failed to hold Joyce. So it had come to this: Agatha despised him! *Agatha.*

This knowledge was still boiling within him when, ten minutes later, the door opened and Celia announced that Mr. Wade wanted to see him.

2

Markham and Wade usually dispensed with formalities and this occasion was not an exception, for no greetings were exchanged when the latter strode into the room, wearing a tweed suit with a jubilant pattern.

"Shan't keep you long," he said brusquely. "And if you don't want to listen, say so, and I'll clear out."

Markham stared at him moodily. Recently, he had discovered that he disliked every one he knew and his scrutiny of Wade did not create a reservation in his favour. On the contrary, the small grey eyes, the big head, and the thick neck seemed personal affronts.

"I can have a drink, I suppose?"

"You know where they are, if you want one."

Wade mixed a couple of drinks, handed one to Markham, then sat in an armchair and stared at his companion, rather in the manner of a professional pugilist, assessing the calibre of his opponent in the opposite corner.

Although Wade remained silent, he was not restrained by considerations of delicacy about introducing a difficult subject, but by an infinitely more complex problem. His visit had been prompted by sudden hatred of Merle, caused by her withering analysis of his character. To be told, in public, that he was an ex-office boy who deluded himself with the belief that his lady friends loved him for himself alone, had humiliated Wade as he had never been humiliated, with the result that he was determined to influence Markham against Merle. But although this was his actual motive, he did not want it to be the apparent one, consequently he had to decide which mask would be the most concealing and the most effective.

"You know me, Oliver," he said at last with bluff heartiness, implying total candour. "I can't beat about the bush. If I've anything to say, I say it, and if people don't like it, they must do the other thing. So I'm going to tell you—flat—that if you don't get rid of Merle now, when you've the chance, you'll regret it to your dying day."

"That's what she wants."

"She *wants* you to divorce her—before she knows what the other fellow's going to do?"

"Yes."

"Then sling her out—quick!"

"I don't have to. She's gone."

"You're joking!"

"Do I look as if I were joking?"

Wade lit a cigarette.

This news dictated certain tactical changes in his attack on Merle. As she had gone, it was clearly unnecessary to goad Markham to throw her out, consequently some of Wade's ammunition had become superfluous. Soon, however, he recognised the advantages to be derived from Merle's retreat.

"Listen to me, Oliver. You've got the chance of your life—and you'll be cracked if you don't take it. We've been friends a long time, so I don't propose to mince words. Merle always was eccentric and now she's gone crackers. With a father like Joyce, that was bound to happen sooner or later. If you give in to her now, she'll play merry hell with you for the rest of your life."

He broke off but, as Markham said nothing, he went on:

"You've got to get things straight—and keep 'em straight. And the first is this:—people like you and me don't belong anywhere. A man belongs to the class into which he is born. Most men stay in that class—accept its outlook—and are happy enough in a humdrum kind of way. Well, we didn't do that. I don't know, or care, what your start in life was. All I know is that you left it a long way behind, long ago. You and I meant to get on—and we got on. So we're isolated. Oh yes we are!" he exclaimed, as if Markham had contradicted him. "*We're isolated.*"

Again he paused, and again Markham said nothing.

"Let's face it, Oliver. We're not educated and we're not gentlemen, as the word's used, and there's no damn use pretending we're either. We went ahead of the herd and, if a man goes ahead of the herd, the time comes when he looks round and finds that he's alone. That's the fact. And if people like you and me start thinking that facts are fictions, we'll get into hell's own mess—because the only things we understand *are* facts."

"Are these the reasons why you left your wife?"

"They're some of 'em. I married when I was a four-

quid-a-week clerk. My marriage would have been a success if I'd stayed a four-quid-a-week clerk. But I didn't. I went ahead—and Dollie stayed put. Well, what was I to do? Be bored at home—tell lies—and get around on the side? Not me!"

Wade rose, mixed himself another drink, then returned to his armchair.

"I'm not a sentimentalist, Oliver. You know damn well what most men do when they've got to the top. They either have a good time—to make up for the years they spent with their noses to the grindstone—or they stick to work, because it's become a drug."

Almost immediately, he went on:

"Plenty of people will give you plenty of advice, but, remember, they're not your type—and I am. I tell you again you'll be cracked if you don't get rid of Merle now, for good and all."

"And do what?"

"God Almighty! she's not the only woman in the world, is she? With your money, you'll find plenty of women as smart as Merle—and smarter. You're not bothering about the boys, are you? You know that once boys go to boarding school, that's the end of 'em. You only see 'em in the holidays, and not always then, as you know."

After a pause, he added emphatically:

"I'm going to say all I think whether you like it or not. That Joyce crowd is no good, and never was. Joyce had every Irish defect—and that's saying a hell of a lot. Merle's only half-Irish, but, God knows, that's bad enough. You're damned lucky to have the chance to get rid of her."

Markham rose, then stood looking down at Wade for some moments before he said:

"I'll tell you what all that adds up to, from my point of view. It adds up to this: You think I could lead your sort of life."

"And why not?" Wade demanded belligerently.

"What's wrong with my sort of life?"

"Suits you—but it wouldn't suit me."

"Why the hell not?"

"You like knocking around with one woman after another. You like taking them to restaurants, shows, and all the rest of it. That wouldn't be any good to me. It's not what I want."

"Well, what do you want, for God's sake?"

"I want Merle."

Before Wade could speak, Markham repeated:

"I want Merle. And I'm going to get her back. D'you understand? I'm going to get her back."

Wade rose.

"All right. Get on with it. And I hope it keeps fine for you. We shan't meet for some weeks. I'm going to Paris to-night."

Then, as Markham made no comment, Wade heard himself say, as if the words were jerked out against his will:

"Ursula's coming to France with me for two or three months. And that's *not* because I've got money—whatever Merle may think."

"So that landed on you? I thought it did."

"Landed on me! D'you think I care what a madwoman says?"

"Better go, hadn't you?"

"Don't worry. I'm going."

3

The chief effect of Wade's visit was to convince Markham finally that there was neither help nor comfort to be had from the type of men with whom he was familiar. After all, why should there be? He would feel only contempt for a man in his predicament, so why blame Wade or any one else? He was alone, to an extent unimagined by others, and could do nothing to dispel their ignorance.

He could do nothing, because vital relationship with another is created by spontaneity and, for years, Markham had been incapable of revealing himself. He had buried his deepest experiences, as a miser hides coins, consequently he was psychologically incapable of confiding in any one. So, in this crisis with Merle, everything central in him was compelled to remain silent. Only the circumference spoke.

He stopped by the window and gazed at a sunlit park. Several minutes passed, then the door opened and he heard Celia say: "Would you like tea, sir?"

"I don't want any," he replied without looking round.

He thought she had gone till he heard her say:

"Please have tea."

He turned and gazed at her.

Celia regarded him with eyes lit by sympathy. Actually,

she had become a pendulum between conflicting emotions, for, when she was with Merle, her romantic susceptibilities were thrilled to Hollywood intensity; whereas, when she was with Markham, his suffering became the only reality.

"Please have tea," she repeated.

He continued to look at the lithe figure in its dark dress; at the animated features; the wide-open eyes which gazed into his with such earnest entreaty.

Her presence did not humiliate him, and it did not make him angry. Celia knew Merle was in love with another man—she knew Merle had left him—but he did not resent that knowledge. She pitied him, almost as a child might pity another who had lost a treasured toy.

"All right. I'll have tea."

"Oh, thank you! I'll get it now. I shan't be a minute."

She flitted out of the room.

When she returned with a tray, it seemed to him that she had invested every detail of its arrangement with an inviting quality.

An hour later, the door opened and a different Celia appeared—a nervous hesitant Celia.

"Well, what is it?"

"Mr. Green says he wants to see you."

"Old Green! What on earth for?"

"He just says he wants to see you."

"Oh well, ask him in! What the devil does it matter who comes?"

It is possible that when Mr. Harry Green appeared in an immaculate morning coat, wearing the inevitable orchid, both of them were vaguely aware that this was the first occasion on which they had been alone together. But Green had preoccupations much more disturbing than this, the chief being that he felt at ease only with those sympathetically inclined towards him and he knew the reverse was the case with Markham.

The effect of an antagonistic atmosphere on the old man was to render him impressionistic in speech, to such an extent that divination was often necessary to penetrate to the meaning behind the almost chaotic sentences.

"Couldn't stay up there," he announced in a plaintive tone. "Human being on the floor below. Suffering human being. Had to come down. Yes!"

Markham stared at this apparition—stared at the tall fragile figure, the fine hands, the surprisingly animated blue eyes, the distinguished white hair. Twenty years ago, it would have given Markham considerable satisfaction to have known the much-publicised and tremendously popular Mr. Harry Green, but it gave none now. There was something spectral about the old man who had survived his world.

"It's no good," the quavering voice went on. "No good at all. Codes, rules—all that. Not with women. Useless! Logic—no good. But they're generous. Yes, they're generous. On their own ground."

"You mean: I ought to tell Merle she can do what she likes, is that it?"

"Been with her to-day. For an hour. More than an hour. Not many left like her. None soon. Only thing to do is to give in. Merle's in love with another man. Yes! If you're done without her, tell her you're done. She's generous. On her own ground. I remember Jack Fitzmaurice, when Angela Carstairs wanted to run off with Phil Davenham—did run off with him. . . ."

He proceeded to give an almost incoherent account of this once-famous scandal, but Markham listened to little of it.

This was the sort of stuff that Green pumped into Merle! Harry Green had been famous for conquests almost before he left Eton, so he had an inexhaustible store of romantic experiences. Many beautiful women had loved him and, which was more remarkable, had remained friends after they had ceased to be lovers.

"Can't standardize women. Won't come off. The women are trying to do it. No good . . . I'm old, you know. Shan't last long. Not long. No! Had a good life. I'll be able to die."

Pause.

"Very strange! For years, age is something that happens to others. Suddenly, it happens to *you*. Jove, it's awful!"

Another pause.

"You become a cartoon. of yourself. A strange face watches you when you're shaving. Jove, it's awful!"

He looked at Markham as if surprised to find he was there, then went on:

"Keep thinking about people—start writing to them—

then remember they're dead. It's queer. Very queer! Something in you gets younger—the older you get. That's not fair. No! All sorts of things come back to you. Little things—tiny things. A smile. A laugh, and a white brow puckering. She's leaning against an old wall in summer sunshine. You stretch out hands. No good. Gone!"

He looked round the room, as if he had suddenly discovered that it was not his own familiar one.

"Couldn't stay up there. Fellow human being suffering."

Markham watched him totter towards the door.

Directly the old man appeared in the hall, Celia ran to him and asked in a whisper:

"Well? Any good?"

"Shut up in a box. They've all shut themselves up in boxes. I don't want to live much longer. 'What for?'"

"You're tired. You listen to me. You've done what you could—and now you must rest. D'you hear what I'm saying? You must rest. I'll come up later."

"You'll come up?"

"After dinner."

"Ah! Sure you'll come?"

"Yes, of course."

"Shut up in a box."

CHAPTER II

TWO WORLDS IN A GRILL ROOM

I

"You can say what you like, Merle, but the more I see of him, the more complex he becomes. How long is it since you came to this flat? Nearly two months, anyway. Well, he still wants to see me. Two or three times a week. Sometimes more. It's amazing."

Merle did not speak immediately, so Brent looked round the sitting-room and again decided that he liked her Chelsea flat.

It consisted of two miniature rooms on the sixth floor of a modern block, facing well-kept public gardens, with an exhilarating view of the river, now sparkling in July sun-

shine. Merle's was one of fifty flats which the management always let furnished and might therefore have had a standardised appearance, but the introduction of personal trifles had imposed individuality on rooms which had been any one's home and would be again.

Then he looked at Merle who was sitting in a small armchair, evidently only half-aware of his presence. She wore a dark suit and a black hat which emphasised the blonde hair, but Brent was impressed chiefly by a new quality in her appearance and one more easily detected than defined.

Eventually he decided that she had reverted to the Merle before marriage, *plus* the transforming effect of her Verna experience. She had a virginal air, which seemed incongruous not only to her actual situation but to the atmosphere of intensity which isolated her.

"Listen, Rod! You're dining with him to-night and——"

"Don't you ask me—again—to get him to divorce you!"

"But he must! He *must*. I can't go on if he doesn't."

"Well, he won't. Do get that into your head. Heavens! How many more times do I——"

He got no further because she burst into tears. The next moment she was sobbing with the abandonment of a child.

Brent lit a cigarette and waited. Directly she gained a measure of control, he began to talk in a manner which made no conversational demand on her.

He gave snapshots of evenings he had spent with Markham and of meetings at the flat with Marjorie Dawes and some of her crowd. He presented these snapshots from a trick angle which accentuated their comedy aspect, for Brent knew from long experience that it was necessary only to amuse Merle in order to dispel her darkest mood.

Nevertheless, he interspersed hints at more serious matters. For instance, he suggested that she had an enemy in Wade, and indicated that there was something enigmatic in Dawes, who never went to the flat although scarcely a day passed without Marjorie turning up at about six for a cocktail.

Suddenly Merle asked:

"What do you really make of Dawes?"

"You must remember I'm prejudiced, because he's the only one of that crowd who's ever read a book. I dis-

covered, by a fluke, that Dawes has read quite a bit—Ibsen, Nietzsche, and so on—although he never talks about it. In fact, he never talks about himself. There's something queer about him."

"You must have a guess. You always have a theory about every one."

"Dawes is a man on his own. I'm certain of that. I know the signs and Dawes has all of them. If Marjorie imagines she could ever put a fast one over on him, she's wrong. She might as well try to outwit the devil. He's got her, and every one else, summed up to a hair. He's a reason for everything, so he's not avoiding Oliver for nothing."

"I'm certain you're right. I felt that Dawes was working something out when I came back from Paris. All the same, I like him."

"I like him. I'd rather have him for a friend than the other way round. I've a feeling he's glad I'm seeing a lot of Oliver."

"Why should he be glad?"

"Don't know. But I think he is."

Then he went on:

"Did I tell you that I ran into Agatha the other week? I remind her of stormy scenes at Highgate, so she wasn't enthusiastic. All she said was: 'So you're in this.' I said I was in it all right. I asked after Daphne, but she——"

"It doesn't matter what she said about Daphne, because she knows nothing about her. I told Daphne to keep out of this and she's keeping out."

A moment later Brent said:

"I'll have to go soon but, before I do, there's some questions I want to ask and something I have to say. You don't have to answer the questions. Here's the first. I suppose you still hear from Yashvin?"

"*Still* hear from him?"

There was such apprehension in the tone that he said quickly:

"I didn't mean that exactly. I'll put it this way. Yashvin knows that you'd go to him the moment he sends for you. He also knows you want a double divorce to be arranged. He's known that quite a time now. Well, what's he doing about it?"

"It can't be done right away. He's not independent, although he soon will be. He'll leave the firm he's with

now but, placed as he is, he couldn't have a scandal. By the autumn, or early next year, everything will be arranged."

Then she added:

"My life depends on it. That's not exaggeration. I've told Marjorie so again and again. She's always here."

"Does Dawes ever come?"

"Never."

"I suppose Marjorie's told you that Oliver's drinking more than usual? He always was a fairly heavy drinker, of the joyless modern kind, but he's got worse. Nowadays, he goes only to restaurants where he's *not* known, which is a change. He does not want enquiries about Madame. To-night we're dining at the Royal. Incidentally, it's evident that he intends to remain in town. Of course he's burnt up physically about you, but you know that. One way and another, you're trying him pretty high."

"I can't *help* it. I hate him when I see him. And it's not the sudden hatred which practically every wife sometimes feels for her husband just because he *is* her husband. It's real hatred. I can't help what I'm doing."

"I didn't say you could. But you're wrong if you think not seeing him will make him more likely to divorce you. I've tried to get him to divorce you, but I might as well try to argue with an echo."

"Do you know why I won't meet him? We'd have nothing to say if we did meet. We've never had anything to say. That's why we were never alone. Do you realise that we never *were* alone?"

"Perhaps not."

"Well, we weren't. Either Wade, or the Dawes, or some of their crowd, were always with us. Even on holidays in the south of France. Sometimes we were alone with the boys in the summer, but it was always a failure. We'd have nothing to say if we did meet. What on earth do you find to say to him?"

"I listen."

"*You* listen! That must be a lie, Rod."

"It's my new rôle and it doesn't matter how I got around to it. But I shan't be able to keep it up much longer, especially as Oliver keeps saying the same things over and over and over again. I shall explode soon."

"I believe it."

Brent rose.

"I'm off. But make no mistake about one thing, Merle. He's a bigger mystery than you think—much bigger. I ran into old Green some time ago—and he said that Oliver's shut up in a box."

Merle rose impetuously.

"I'll see him if you like. It will do no good, but I'll see him."

She put her hands to her forehead, then went on:

"That's not what I wanted to say. Wait a minute!"

She went to the window, then stood looking at the river.

"Something is making me break this up. Something, or someone. It would have been broken up if Boris had never been born."

Almost immediately she went on:

"If I do see him, he's not to talk sentimental rubbish about the boys. They're jumping for joy because they've gone to the Montagues for the holidays. He wanted to get rid of them—and he's got rid of them."

Then, after a pause:

"You remember I promised I wouldn't try to commit suicide again? Well, if it weren't for Boris, I wouldn't go on with it. Not for a day! What for? Anyhow, another flare-up is coming which will do for the lot of us. Can't you *feel* it coming?"

"I have recently. But that may be because the Economic Conference has collapsed."

"Not with me, because I never knew there had been one. I'm like father—I feel things long before they happen. Anyhow, I've never been the slightest use to any one."

"You have to me. That's what I wanted to tell you, although it's a bit late."

"To *you*?"

"Yes. Years and years ago—when that row was on with my people because I wanted to be a writer. You believed in me, Merle. Without any evidence. And it meant no end to me then."

"And it wouldn't now?"

"It meant no end *then*. More than I could ever tell you. That's why I never tried."

He kissed her forehead, then went slowly out.

room as, naturally, the majority of its patrons were out of town in July. Markham and Brent had a corner table and none of the tables near them was occupied.

Coffee had been brought ; cigarettes lit ; but neither had spoken for some minutes. Being as ill-assorted as two men could be, they had reached the point at which either their temperaments must come into full collision, or these meetings must end. And each, in his degree, was aware of it.

Till now, Markham had tried to represent himself as a normal husband and father, whose wife had behaved abominably without any extenuating circumstances, but Brent's manner had implied a total refusal to accept him in this rôle. So deadlock had been reached. And nothing could have revealed it more pertinently than the nature of their private thoughts as they now sat smoking cigarettes and sipping coffee.

Although compelled to seek Brent's company, Markham's former dislike had deepened during the last few weeks. Not only was Brent wholly different from those with whom Markham had always associated, but the latter sensed loyalties in him which were utterly remote from those to which lip-honour is paid by ordinary people. Brent was detached from the professed values of the majority and contemptuous of them. Consequently Markham felt that if Brent were representative of most artists, the average person was right to distrust them—in the same way as a rabid nationalist resents those who serve international values. Above all, Markham had discovered that the world of thought and emotion was as real to Brent as the world of profits and Stock Exchange prices was to him. And that seemed incredible to Markham.

Meanwhile Brent, who had glanced several times at his companion, was elaborating a theory about the type to which he belonged. In Brent's view, men like Markham and Wade suffered from psychic cancer. That is, they had developed Will at the expense of every other human faculty. They were, therefore, monstrously distorted and their faces bore tragic witness to that distortion. The murder of every faculty, except that of Will, had enabled these men to achieve success and, having achieved it, disillusionment had been swift and dire. They had narrowed themselves to Get : not broadened themselves to Give. They had raped Power : not radiated it.

The defects of the subjective type—"sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought"—had been meticulously defined, but a dual clarification would have been effected if it had also been revealed that "men of action" are such because they destroy their inner life. The objective type, no less than the subjective, is half-dead.

He was interrupted in these speculations by Markham blurting out:

"You never ask questions, but I suppose you wonder why I want to see you so often?"

"Sometimes. Still, I suppose the reason is something like this. You suddenly found yourself in a world which seemed like an asylum to you. Well, what does a man do, who thinks he is sane, when he finds himself in an asylum? He becomes friendly with the most sane of the lunatics. The fact that he is the most sane makes contact possible: and the fact that he is mad gives him value as a guide."

"So I only think I'm sane?"

"Naturally."

"Look here, Brent. You're an intelligent man and you can't tell me that Merle isn't behaving like a mad woman."

"Merle's never been in love, never been happy. Now she's in love and radiantly happy. If that's madness, a lot of people would give their eyes for it."

"So every one's to follow a personal will-of-the-wisp? There's no such thing as truth."

"*Truth*? Who knows anything about that? Do you imagine you could bear to know the truth about yourself? Do you think you could see yourself as God sees you—and live?"

Markham did not reply immediately. Brent watched deft waiters glide from table to table, rendering suave service, while others with nothing to do looked on with the patience of statues.

"Oh very well!" Markham exclaimed with heavy emphasis. "Truth doesn't exist and every one can do what he likes."

"Truth is like the sun, Markham. Sunshine is very pleasant—with the sun ninety million miles away. *Ninety* miles away, it would be annihilation. Truth is like that. It has to be accommodated to human receptive power. In other words, the element of illusion necessarily enters into every conception of truth. That's inevitable—because we

do not know the nature of essential reality. And the most comic comedians are the theologians, philosophers, and scientists who pretend that they do."

"I don't know about all that, but what I do know is that Merle has an illusion, and a big one, as she thinks Yashvin is God!"

"Yes, Merle has her illusion—and you have yours and I have mine. And Wade has his, and so has Dawes, and so has Green, and so has Celia—and so has every one else."

Before Markham could speak, Brent went on:

"Nations have illusions just as much as individuals. In fact, it's national illusions which create national unity. You remember we were sustained from 1914 to 1918 by the myth that the world was being made safe for democracy. The Germans, who are theorists and minor artists, deceive themselves with the belief that they are what is called realists—and they distort or ignore every fact which conflicts with that fiction. The Japanese, despite all the visual evidence to the contrary, think that they are the Sons of Heaven—hence their unity and contempt for death. Of course in all illusion there is an element of truth and——"

"So the Japs aren't entirely wrong in thinking they're the Sons of Heaven?"

"Not entirely—if it is a fact that man is made in the image of God. The trouble with the Japs is that they're so damned exclusive."

Markham beckoned the waiter, then ordered more brandy in a manner which indicated exceptional need for it.

"Listen, Brent. All that abstract stuff is out of my line. I can only talk in concrete terms. You say we all have our illusion. Well, what's mine?"

"You thought power was an end in itself. That is, you thought the possession of power would automatically include everything else worth having. You must have thought that. Why, otherwise, did you give your best years to achieving a position of power? You denied yourself, narrowed yourself to one objective, developed your will, as a weight-lifter develops his muscles. Most men are content to get a job and rub along somehow. You weren't. You knew what you wanted—and got it. And if it didn't turn out to be all your fancy had painted, well, that's a way illusions have—directly they cease to beckon from afar, and take you by the arm."

"I see. And what about Dawes?"

"I don't know about him. But I'll bet that Dawes hasn't always been what he is now. There's something frozen about him. Green is a romantic, of course, but not a fool. His philosophy is—Frills. And, perhaps, it's a very necessary one in a drab world. "As to Celia, well, at the minute, Celia is the joy of my life."

"What possible interest can you have in her?"

"Celia! In love with George, the bus conductor! Convinced that there never has been, and never will be, any one as marvellous as George! There's illusion for you—illusion in gorgeous flower. The heyday and height of self-deception! Of course, it's not true that all the world loves a lover, but it is true that all the world envies a lover. Me too! I'd give my chance of heaven to love as Celia loves—to walk a magic world; to sleep in bliss, and wake in paradise!"

"You must be out of your mind! She's a servant!"

"She's a millionaire, an emotional millionaire—and we're a couple of emotional bankrupts. Probably, at this minute, she's walking round the park with George. And we're—drinking brandy. She'll go to her bed and dream of George. What shall we dream about? She'll wake to wonder. What will rouse us? She scatters largesse. And we scatter—what?"

After a pause, he went on:

"Celia's at the stage in which she could become anything. What she *will* become is George's wife—but let's forget that. She's Possibility incarnate. That state will last little longer than wild cherry blossom, but, while it does last, it is as lovely."

Markham stared at him.

If Brent were like this, at the age of forty, what must he have been like when he first met Merle? She'd had some pretty influences in her life! This fellow; Joyce; Green! No wonder she was abnormal!

"What the devil do you think the world would be like if it were run by people like you?"

"What do you think it's like—having been run by people like you?"

Then, determined to land on Brent somehow, Markham demanded:

"You're damned good at analysing other people!"

Damned good at spotting *their* illusions! I suppose you had one when you decided to become a writer, didn't you?"

"I certainly did!"

"And what was it?"

"To give the world another heart and other pulses."

This quotation did not register immediately, but at last Markham said:

"D'you mean you thought you'd alter people?"

"I wanted to show them something I'd glimpsed."

"Don't you now?"

"I'm fighting a rearguard action."

"What the *hell* does that mean?"

After a prolonged pause, Brent said:

"I'll put it this way. I suppose the time comes when a business man has to fight a rearguard action. That is, the time comes when he's put in his drive and burned up his best energy. So what does he do? He has an impressive background, because he has a good position. He knows how to pick men and use their brains, because experience has made him crafty. He exploits this knowledge. He fights a rearguard action, designed to cover a general retreat. He's no longer got what it takes—in the front line."

"Well, what about a writer?"

"He's less fortunate, because the poor bastard has to go on doing the work himself. He can't get others to do it for him. At least, he can't if he's an individual writer. So he covers his retreat by exploiting his knowledge of technique—by presenting old ideas from a new angle—by substituting tricks for originality. Imaginative creation depends on ever-expanding inner growth. When that ceases, you—fight a rearguard action."

"So you've lost your illusion, is that it?"

"Yes. And so have you. I lost mine when I realised that the only thing an author can write nowadays is an epitaph."

Brent lit a cigarette, then added:

"But something may turn up. I may find my equivalent to Boris Yashvin."

"That damned dago!"

"I don't suppose he is a damned dago, because Merle would soon have spotted that. But what's it matter what he is? It's his effect on her that counts. You say she has an illusion about him. Well, you probably had one about her—

when you asked her to marry you. But you were in the seventh heaven—then. Illusion is the passport to paradise.”

“A fool’s paradise!”

“And how many human beings, do you imagine, are capable of any other? People keep saying this is a relative world, but they don’t realise it. We’re told that everything which happens in the physical world is relative to an observer. And everything that happens in the emotional world is relative to an illusion.”

Markham was too irritated to say anything although, paradoxically, he welcomed the companionship of this man whose vitality had the quality of quicksilver. In a grotesque way, Brent had become a substitute for Merle. Like most extreme natures, Markham needed the stimulus and the stabilisation created by association with a temperament wholly opposed to his own.

Meanwhile, Brent was concerned with the ironic fact that he had revealed his inner collapse as a writer to—Oliver Markham! A few weeks ago, that would have seemed stark impossibility.

He glanced at his companion, as if to convince himself that he *had* confided his secret to him, and was suddenly struck by a hint of something foreign in Markham’s appearance. The swarthy complexion: the crinkly hair! It was odd he hadn’t noticed them till now.

“I’ve got it!” Markham exclaimed. “You do it deliberately. Everything that ordinary decent people accept, you attack. You attack the normal and defend the abnormal. Damn it, *you’d* defend Joyce!”

“There was an idealist for you.”

“An—*idealist*!”

“Listen, Markham. On the 12th July, 1842, Heine wrote in Paris: ‘I advise our descendants to come into the world with thick skins.’ Joyce ignored that profound and practical advice. There were plenty of things about him I didn’t understand, but the main lines are clear enough.”

“He was damned near a madman!”

“That’s been said about every exceptional person who was fool enough to come to this pestilential planet.”

“A womaniser—a drunkard—and he treated his wife abominably.”

“So did Wade, but there’s not much in common between him and Joyce; so it goes deeper than that. Joyce

demanded from life what *he* wanted—not what they hypnotise you into believing that you want. He was certain that somewhere—just round the corner—an experience was waiting which would transform everything. So he went round a good many corners.”

After a pause, Brent went on :

“ Ask yourself some questions. By materialistic standards, what had Joyce to worry about ? He had health, education, money. The idea, nowadays, is that any one possessing that trinity is necessarily all right. Well, Joyce wasn’t all right. Actually, he was a religious being.”

“ Good God ! ”

“ He was a religious being because he demanded absolute values. A cheap illusion satisfies Wade, but not Joyce. Joyce took on the whole of himself. Very few of us do that. Our pride, or our vanity, or our stupidity, paint a portrait of us—and that’s all we see when we stand in front of a mirror.”

Again, Markham beckoned the waiter.

“ Bring some more brandy.” Then, turning to Brent :
“ Want some ? ”

“ No, thanks.”

When the waiter had gone, Markham said :

“ You have proved what I told you. You defend every one who’s abnormal. You defend Joyce. You defend Merle. You’d defend the devil himself.”

“ The devil has plenty of advocates. Oddly enough, chiefly among his professed enemies. Anyway, we’ll leave him out of it. You said I never asked questions. Well, I’ll ask one now.”

“ Go ahead.”

“ Wash out my theories about Joyce. You knew him for some years before you met Merle and you’ve made it quite clear what you thought of him. Now let’s take Agatha. It’s obvious that she must have been a very sentimental bride, with very rosy ideas about marriage. Merle was the first child—the product of two very different kinds of frustrated idealism. You knew she’d always been unhappy. You knew she’d tried to commit suicide. And, knowing all this, you married her. Well—why ? ”

“ Because I was in love with her, of course ! ”

“ Right ! Even so, you must have realised you were taking a risk. Especially as she told you she wasn’t in love with you.”

"She didn't know what she was saying!"

"Or doing?"

Markham hit the table with his fist.

"I thought that if I took her out of that Highgate environment, she'd become a normal person!"

"What on earth would you have done if she had? How would you have liked another Agatha?"

Markham leaned across the table, then said with heavy emphasis:

"You can talk till you're black in the face, but you can't alter the fact that Merle's behaving abominably."

"Did you expect her to be normal? Merle Joyce—normal!"

Then Brent added:

"Look here—you needn't feel humiliated by all this. At least, not when you're with me. I've taken plenty of kicks—not like the one you've had, but kicks all the same. My sexual affairs have always been a flop, but I've had delightful companionship with women—and owe them a lot."

After a silence Markham said, in a tone of utter dejection:

"It's been hell since she went. Every minute of it! Every second of it!"

"I'm damned sorry for you, Oliver."

It was the first time Brent had used the Christian name.

"I'm going to get her back," Markham said thickly. "You can help—and you must help."

"Let's face facts. If Yashvin sends for her, she'll go. That's certain. No, wait a minute!" Brent exclaimed, seeing that Markham was about to interrupt. "She'll go. But suppose he doesn't send for her?"

"Go on!"

"This is guesswork, because Yashvin is an unknown X in an intricate equation. But let's assume he has no proposition to make. If he hasn't; Merle must be forced to realise the fact—and forced to realise it by him. Get that! By him."

"Well, go on!"

"She must be convinced by Yashvin. She'll never be convinced by any one else. At the moment, she's still certain he will send for her. So the only thing to do is to wait and see if he does."

Brent looked round, then added:

"It's late. We'd better go. The waiters will have enough to do after we've gone."

Markham paid the bill, then, seeing that Brent was gazing at the frequently-opening service door, through which waiters went to or from the kitchens, he said:

"You seem very interested in that door."

"It's not a door. It's a frontier between the world of Want and the world of Wealth. Come on! Let's go."

CHAPTER III

DAWES

I

THE LADY from Woking had come to town, so the Dawes had left the little flat in the mews near Bond Street and would not return for at least a week. Meanwhile they had a small suite at the Savoyard Hotel, near Dover Street, which was expensive but they were not paying full rates.

The Savoyard had been open only a few years and, during that period, the Dawes had induced a number of wealthy Americans to stay there, receiving a not negligible commission for these introductions. But, now, owing to world-wide economic collapse, rich Americans were not visiting Europe, with the result that the Savoyard was almost empty and the Dawes had a suite on remarkably reasonable terms.

They looked exceedingly prosperous. Marjorie's suit had that simplicity of line, that unique air, which seems fortuitous, but is conferred only by an exclusive model. Unobtrusive perfection characterised Dawes's appearance, and the price paid for his shoes would have provided many another man with a suit. Any one watching them, as they stood in their sitting-room on this August afternoon, would have been convinced that here was a couple whose affluence had survived the tidal wave of world depression.

"But surely we're not staying in London! I suppose you know it's August?"

Dawes looked at her, noting, with amused detachment, the aggrieved expression and the slight droop of the predatory mouth.

"I'm afraid we'll have to stay in town," he said at last in his customary casual tone.

"You mean—we haven't a bob!"

"That's a fairly succinct summary of the position."

"Not enough to pay the bill here?"

"We've nothing, Marjorie, but don't let that worry you. It will be remedied to-day to some extent."

He handed her a cigarette, then pointed to a chair.

"Sit down for five minutes before you go. You must get some things straight."

She sat down, then looked up at him apprehensively.

"There's nothing to bother about, my dear girl. I have long-term plans, but the point is that they are long-term ones. They have to be. But I won't bother you with details."

He paused, then went on in the same objective manner.

"You know, more or less, how we've lived for years. We could live like that for two reasons: we aren't fools; and there was a post-war boom, which meant people had money to spare. They had economic elbow-room. That's over—and it's not coming back."

"Not coming back?"

"No. It's going to get worse—much worse. So we'll have to adjust."

"You mean we'll have to——"

"I don't mean," he cut in, "that we'll reduce our way of living, because I don't think either of us is made that way. But I do mean that we'll have to use other methods."

She tried to speak, but he checked her.

"Better listen. We haven't done badly out of rich tourists in the past, but that's over. Luxury hotels, night clubs, and so on, are doing badly—and that doesn't help us. As to cards, well, one's luck mustn't be too consistently good, because things like that get noticed nowadays. The old game is up. We'll have to—adjust."

"What's the good of keeping on saying that we'll have to *adjust*? What the hell are we going to *do*?"

"Keep our nerve in the first place," he replied equably.

"In the second, we'll continue to nurse Oliver and Wade."

"My God, Ralph! You don't think you're going to pull off anything big with them?"

"Quite big—in time. Men like them, who came from nothing, who've made a packet, are the biggest fools imaginable—outside their own game. Look at the way Oliver's handling this Merle affair."

"You can't be very interested in Oliver—as you haven't seen him for weeks."

"All the same I've been occupied with his affairs. And I'm going to see him this afternoon."

"What about?"

"Various odds and ends."

She met his full glance and, for some illogical reason, suddenly felt scared.

"Don't imagine," he went on indifferently, "that I've neglected Oliver because I've not been to see him. Far from it. And you've been in almost daily touch with Merle."

"Listen, Ralph! I don't like many people, but I do like Merle and——"

"I like her too. The difference between us is that you like her emotionally and I like her—scientifically. We'll see which helps her most in the end."

He lit a cigarette, then continued:

"The point is that Oliver has been knocked over the ropes of the only ring about which he knows anything. He's muddled. And, as a result of meeting Brent so often, he'll soon be more muddled. Oliver's only chance was to divorce Merle straightaway, and marry again. He didn't take it. He's drinking more than usual—and seeing Brent in the crazy hope that he'll persuade Merle to come back."

"And how does all that help us?"

"I said I wouldn't go into details. I've made up my mind how the situation will end—and I'm banking on being right. But it's a long-term speculation."

"And how do we live meanwhile?"

"We'll manage."

"I don't care what you do as long as you don't hurt Merle."

"On the contrary, I'm going to help her. And now I've a few questions for you."

He put his cigarette down, then turned to her.

"Does Merle still ask why Oliver would never take her to the Atalanta Park Hotel?"

"Sometimes. Why?"

"Everything interests me. Do you think Merle will ever go back to Oliver?"

"No, I don't. If Yashvin walks out on Merle, it will kill her."

"People don't die just because they want to. Here's the

last question. You told me, not so long ago, that Merle kept saying she knew nothing about Oliver before she married him. Nothing about his parents—where he went to school—or whether he'd had love affairs. Remember? Well, does she still bother about all that?"

"Why on *earth* do you want to know?"

"I've told you that everything interests me."

She rose quickly, then went over to him.

"Listen, Ralph! I'm not particular. You know I've done some tough things and met some tough people. But I have limits. And I've got a feeling that you haven't. Let's chuck these plans of yours. I don't know what they are, but I've a hunch we'd better chuck them."

"And do what?"

"Cut expenses and go to ground for a bit."

"Little flat at Brixton? Cheap restaurants? Guinea dresses?"

Her glance failed to meet his and he laughed. Then he took her wrists, held her at arm's-length, and studied her intently.

"It's odd," he said at last, "but you're the only human being who means a thing to me."

"God, how you've altered, Ralph! When you were in the army——"

"Oh—*that*!"

"So it means nothing now?"

"Less than nothing."

Before she could speak, he went on:

"Well, *is* Merle still interested in the fact that she knew so little of Oliver when she married him?"

"Not interested enough to ask him, but she does mention it sometimes."

"Good!"

"You've asked enough questions, so here's one for you. Merle wants to know what you think of Brent?"

"You can tell her that I think Brent is a very gifted man. I've read all his books. But you needn't tell Merle that I think Brent will muddle Oliver hopelessly."

After a pause, she said:

"I ought to go."

"Right! I'm off to see Oliver. Oh, by the way, I've meant to say this for some time."

Almost immediately, he went on in the same casual tone:

"If you think you could get a better time with another man, don't bother about me."

"That's the advice you gave Oliver about Merle! You told him to tell her that, if she thought she could better herself, she could go."

"Well?"

"I can't get away from you. You know I've tried, but I can't."

"Good!"

He kissed her, then said:

"Now run along. We'll dine at the Berkeley. I'll have some money by then."

2

Even by current standards, Markham's mood was a dark one as he sat in the sitting-room, a drink by his side, waiting for Dawes to arrive.

He had spent two days alone, had drunk heavily, and now felt physically inert. Also, he was trying to decide which irritated him more—Dawes's recent neglect; or his sudden decision to come to the flat this afternoon.

He lit a cigarette, but, a moment later, threw it aside.

Again he reproached himself for becoming so intimate with Dawes, and derived little satisfaction from the fact that the process had been so imperceptible that it was fully recognised only in retrospect. At the outset, Dawes had undertaken commissions of a trifling kind but, gradually, his influence had grown till it covered a host of minor activities which, in aggregate, made it powerful. Eventually it extended to things other than betting, card parties, and so on, chiefly because Merle became increasingly friendly with Marjorie. It was irritating enough to remember all this, but, in addition, although Dawes had always been polite, there had never been a trace of subservience in his attitude. On the contrary, he had a detachment which amounted almost to criticism.

Still, there was one satisfactory feature in present circumstances: Dawes had had nothing out of him since Merle's return from Paris, and would certainly get nothing out of him while she remained in that Chelsea flat. He had had plenty in the past, but, now, he'd have to find another patron.

When Dawes arrived, his immaculate appearance

deepened Markham's irritation. It was damnable that this feller, who was a complete parasite, should be so debonair and look so prosperous! Everything about him was infuriating—especially the ginger toothbrush moustache and the vigilant eyes.

"Haven't seen *you* for some time!"

"No. I've been extremely busy."

"Busy! Shouldn't think there's a lot doing in your line nowadays."

"There isn't a lot, but there are—possibilities."

"Glad to hear it."

"Thanks."

Dawes took a cigarette from his case, then sat in an armchair opposite Markham.

"As you know, Marjorie has seen a lot of Merle," he went on nonchalantly, "so I've been in touch with developments."

Markham leaned forward, then almost shouted:

"You think I'm a bloody fool not to divorce her, don't you?"

"No."

"Then what do you think?"

"That you are what you are."

Dawes added: "Merle's a complex person. She's a neurotic, a romantic, and yet she's not a fool. That's an unusual combination."

"I don't want a lot of intricate talk. I get all I want of that. I tell you that Merle would have been a perfectly ordinary woman if it hadn't been for the influence of two men—Joyce and Brent."

"Why leave yourself out? You're not ordinary."

"Bunkum!"

"Far from ordinary."

"I'm as ordinary as Wade!"

"You think that, if Wade were in your position, he would handle it as you are doing? You are abnormal as Joyce, in a totally different way, of course."

"I've been spared your opinion of my character till now."

"It's pertinent now."

Markham mixed himself a drink, but did not offer his companion one.

"I suppose you had some reason for coming here, didn't you?"

" Yes. You'll probably think it's a trifling one, but it's bothering Marjorie."

" Well, what is it, for God's sake ! "

" This. Merle often gets obsessed with a subject—usually an entirely trivial one. Keeps returning to it like a dog to a bone. For instance, she frequently says that although she asked you again and again, you always made an excuse for not taking her to the Atalanta Park Hotel."

After a silence, Dawes went on :

" That's why I haven't been to see Merle lately."

" Why not ? What the hell would it matter if she asked you why I didn't take her to the Atalanta ? "

" It would be—awkward—for me to explain that you avoided the Atalanta because it reminds you of Flora."

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked the seconds away, and continued to tick them away, while Markham tried to convince himself that Dawes had said the words he had just uttered. It was flat impossibility that he knew of his relations with Flora ! No one had known ! She'd been dead twelve years !

It was imperative to speak, to say something—anything ! But a realisation of the effect on Merle, if she learned of his treatment of Flora, so overwhelmed him that speech was impossible.

If Merle, the romantic Merle, discovered the facts about Flora, the results would be devastating. It would make his indignation about Yashvin seem hypocrisy. Merle would claim that she was doing what he had done, in a much smaller degree, and with no tragic result. He could hear her say : " You won't commit suicide. Not you ! " She would demand to know everything about the years during which Flora had been his lover. She would demand details of their last meeting—details of Flora's suicide. She would believe that *she* was responsible for Flora's death. God only knew what Merle would think ! But one thing was certain : if she learned the facts about Flora, she would never come back to him.

He glanced at Dawes, who was smoking a cigarette and studying a photograph of Merle which stood in the middle of the mantelpiece.

" What do you know about Flora ? "

" Everything."

" I don't believe it."

"All right—don't believe it."

Dawes rose, crossed to the little table near Markham, mixed himself a drink, then returned to his armchair.

"Tell me what you know about her?"

"She was your lover for three years. You kept her in a flat at Maida Vale. When you broke with her, she drank herself to death."

Markham looked round quickly, as if to convince himself that they were alone.

"Does any one else know?"

"Only one man, and he doesn't know everything. He's a doctor called Vance."

"But—but——"

"It's quite simple. I knew Flora well and liked her a lot. I was still in the army, but got to the Atalanta quite a bit. In 1918 Flora disappeared. No one knew where she'd gone, although some said she'd returned to Ireland to get married. I couldn't find out anything definite."

Dawes put his cigarette into an ash-tray, then went on:

"I'd almost forgotten Flora when I ran into Vance. He used to have a good practice in Maida Vale, but he over-worked and drank too much so he lost most of it. One day, in a pub, we began to argue about how many people commit suicide through losing out on a love affair. I said not many, but Vance didn't agree. Then he told me about Flora. She was delirious the week before she died, so he heard her story."

"Does he know that I'm——"

"All he knows is that the name of Flora's man was Markham."

"Do you see Vance nowadays?"

"Sometimes."

"How long is it since he told you about Flora?"

"Not a great while."

"How did you know that I was the Markham who kept Flora?"

"Wade had told me you were very friendly with her. I remembered that some of the Atalanta crowd had said that you stopped going there not long after Flora left. Then, of course, your refusal to take Merle to the Atalanta was indicative. And there were other reasons why I knew, but they're not interesting."

After a long silence, Dawes went on:

"Isn't it odd how the associations of one place will keep a man away from it, while the associations of another have no effect upon him? You're an example of both reactions. You won't go to the Atalanta because of Flora; but you often dine with Brent in a—Soho restaurant."

Markham had been about to strike a match, but he did not strike it.

This man knew everything! He knew about his birth; his upbringing; everything!

Several minutes passed.

At last Markham came to a decision. Whatever the price, Merle must never know what Dawes knew. How ludicrous his contempt for foreigners would seem to her if she discovered that he was half a foreigner himself!

He rose unsteadily, then stood looking down at Dawes.

"No one is ever to know. D'you understand? No one!"

"Of course."

"But Vance does know."

"You don't have to bother about Vance. He knows nothing about you. And he's too hard-up to turn detective."

"You're—certain?"

"Quite certain."

Markham crossed to a writing table, then said:

"I've forgotten a lot of things lately. One is the expenses you had fixing up that visit to the Capri. I'll give you a cheque."

"Thanks."

A minute later, Markham handed Dawes a cheque, which the latter put away without glancing at it.

"Marjorie and I are dining at the Berkeley to-night. Won't you come along?"

"No Thanks."

"Well, see you soon."

Directly the door closed, Markham collapsed into a chair as if he had been struck by an invisible fist.

CHAPTER IV

INTERMEZZO

DUSK had come, but London was still hypnotised by heat. All through the September day, tropical sunshine had blazed

down on houses, squares, and palpitating streets. Even when day declined, the probing shadows brought little solace ; and, when dusk deepened, the heavy air still held the threat of thunder.

But under the trees of the park was a hint of freshness and, now and again, the rustle of a leaf. Night's slow approach promised reprieve. Parched earth seemed soft after hot pavements, and the sheen of the Serpentine a benediction. The western sky smouldered like embers of a celestial bonfire but, in the zenith, hung a radiant star.

Celia and George sauntered gratefully under a cluster of trees not far from Marble Arch. The drone of traffic was a remote reminder of the world from which they had gained brief respite, and served to stress how precious was the hour they were spending together in the sanctuary of the park at the end of the day.

Her arm rested lightly on his. She talked unceasingly, while the taciturn George, with hat perched precariously on the back of his head, listened with a composite content. The touch of her hand ; the sound of her voice ; the mysterious stealthy advance of night ; the knowledge that work was done ; his pervasive delight in the presence of this girl, who loved him as George had never expected to be loved by any one—all contributed to induce a mood of infinite satisfaction.

As usual, Celia was recounting the latest details of the Merle-Markham drama, in which she had become more intricately involved, and which she found progressively enthralling. George, having listened for many weeks to these Greek-chorus narrations, had long been familiar with the names and natures of the protagonists. For him, this drama had the suspense of an exciting serial, published in weekly instalments. All this suited him admirably, not only because there was nothing he liked so well as listening to Celia, but also because he derived imaginative stimulus from the fact that these "goings-on" concerned wealthy people and were remote therefore from his experience.

"I don't know where I am, George—straight, I don't ! She's always wanting me to go to Chelsea. Every day almost ! When I'm with her, he seems just a nuisance. But when I go back, and find him miserable, I don't know what to think."

She tightened her hold on his arm, then exclaimed :

"What d'you think happened Sunday?"

"Blowed if I know."

"That new cook had gone and I was sewing in the maids' room. Suddenly the door opens—and there he is! Couldn't believe my eyes! Standing there, staring! Was I scared? Then he says:

"'What are you doing?'"

"'Sewing, sir.'"

"'You can sew in the sitting-room.'"

Celia gave a little gasp, then went on:

"So I follow him into the sitting-room. Lord! I thought, hope he doesn't notice what I'm sewing. I was all of a tremble. He looked so strange, and there was I alone with him. I sit in *her* chair—and he sits opposite. Never a word! Sits, staring at nothing, with miserable eyes—and there am I trying to sew with shaking hands."

"I reckon he ought to pay extra for that. 'Tain't your job to sit along with him of nights."

"There we stay for over an hour—and never a word! He only moved once to get another drink. In the end, I forgot about him. You know me, George. You know I always hum when I sew. Well, not knowing what I was doing, I begin to hum—and go on humming like a bird. Then, about eleven, he suddenly says:

"'You'd better go to bed.'"

"Lord! Did I jump? Just as I was going, he calls after me:

"'You're a good girl, Celia.'"

"Well, I say he ought to pay extra."

"Last night, when I went to see if there was anything he wanted about ten o'clock, he looked at me wildly, then almost shouted:

"'I'll get her! Understand? I'll get her back!' I nearly dropped the tray! And I had a proper job not to cry."

Then, as they continued to stroll towards Kensington Gardens, Celia explained how everything had become "topsy-turvy" at the flat. Markham dined out most nights, so no decent cook would stay. There were two "dailies" and an old woman who lived in and was supposed to be the housekeeper, but she did nothing and Celia wasn't certain that she didn't drink a bit.

Then she told him that Merle had become more radiant than ever.

"Never seen anything like that. You'd think she was twenty. Flung her arms round me yesterday, kissed me, and said she'd never been so happy in the whole of her life. I tell you, I don't know where I am."

"None of 'em do, if you ask me."

"Every other night, he dines with Mr. Brent. You know, George, I'll never forget that—when I told Mr. Brent you were working a route which had a wait at Hyde Park Corner at nine o'clock—he gave me a letter to post, so that I could run out and see you."

"He's all right, he is."

Celia then explained that Markham had been much worse during the last two or three weeks—and that Dawes came to the flat more frequently nowadays, usually alone.

"How it's all going to end, I don't know. It gets queerer every day. Mrs. Joyce never comes to see him—and he doesn't seem to want her—but she goes to Chelsea fairly often. So does Mr. Green, although he isn't too well and I have to keep an eye on him to see that he doesn't do too much."

"'Tain't right that all this should be shoved on a kid like you."

"Oh I don't know, George. You've got to help people, haven't you?"

"'Tain't right, I tell you! Kid like you! You belong to me. See? And don't you forget it."

"George! Fancy saying a thing like that! 'Course I belong to you! 'Course I'd do anything you say! But you'd be the first to help any one—and you'd want me to do the same."

"That's all very well. But I'm not having you do yourself in for a lot of people what ought to know better. Looked tired, you did, when I met you to-night."

"That's only the heat. Whew! What a day! Never know anything like it!"

"Nor me neither. Fair grilling—inside the bus."

"And you in those clothes! Dressed-up for the North Pole! Been worrying about you all day."

When they reached Kensington Gardens, they turned and began to stroll in the direction of the Serpentine.

"What beats everything, George, is that no one knows what this foreigner is really like. *She* thinks he's God. Keeps saying he is. But that can't be right. Mrs. Dawes

has met him, but she doesn't say anything. Anyway, not to me."

"George lit a cigarette, then said impressively :

"D'you know what I think about it all ? "

"How can I—when you never say a word ? "

"I'll tell you. All these goings-on could only happen to people what's got money. See? Why could she go abroad? Money! Why could she stay at a posh hotel? Money! Why could that bloke run about with her day after day? Money!"

This diagnosis was such an unprecedented conversational effort on George's part that Celia was too astonished to speak.

"Money!" he repeated emphatically. "And after she comes home, and after she's had a proper row with her old man, what does she do? Clears out! And why can she clear out? Money! It don't matter about the kids. And why not? Because they're at boarding school. And why are they at boarding school? Money!"

After another pause, during which Celia glanced at him spellbound, George went on :

"Suppose he had to be at the depot at six in the morning. Suppose she had to get breakfast, wash the kids, get 'em to school, clean the place up, do the shopping, and a hundred and one other jobs—would she be able to fall in love with some foreign bloke what's told her the tale? Not likely! I've been thinking about all this here for weeks—and I say none of it could have happened if your boss hadn't had money."

This revelation of George's mental processes electrified Celia.

So that's what he did! · Listened, week after week, said nothing, and all the time was turning it over in his own mind, till he came to a decision. Then out it all came—pat! Perhaps he was doing this with all sorts of subjects! And people didn't think George was clever!

Nevertheless, something in her wanted to contest his confident assertion that a working man's wife could never experience dangerous romance. It might be true, but it wasn't good for George to be so sure of it. It made him feel too safe and certain—and it didn't do for a man to feel too safe and certain.

"All the same, George, a working man's wife must some-

times fall in love with someone else. 'Course she must! Love isn't something you work out, like a sum. It's something that knocks you all of a heap."

"Well, there y'are!"

"Suppose a working man's wife *did* fall in love with someone else. What would happen?"

"Bust things up proper. Look at old Jim. When his missis——"

"Oh—*him*! Not surprised his wife packed it up!"

She came to a standstill, then clutched his arm tightly.

"George!"

"What's it now?"

"Suppose, after we're married, I fell in love with someone else!"

"You wouldn't do a thing like that. Not you."

"But suppose I *did*!"

"Ah!"

"What would you do?"

"Now you're asking."

"But what *would* you do?"

"Dunno."

"You'd have to do something."

"That's right."

"Well—what?"

Silence.

"I asked mother what she thought you'd do."

"And what did *she* say?"

"She said, if you'd any sense, you'd give me a good hiding."

"Old Bill tried that with his missis. It made her more crazy than ever on the other bloke. Sailor, he was."

"Did she go off with him?"

"Not 'arf!"

"There you are! It *does* happen!"

"I don't say it don't happen. What I say is that, if it *do* happen, it upsets the apple cart good and proper. And it 'tain't fair on the kids. I don't care what any one says—it 'tain't fair on the kids."

"That's right enough. But suppose there weren't any kids—and I fell in love with someone else. What would you do?"

"Take to drink."

"Lor!"

They walked on till they reached the little bridge overlooking the Serpentine, then stopped and gazed at the shadow-darkened water.

"Cooler now, George."

"It's a fair treat."

They were silent for some minutes, watching night establish sovereignty over the exhausted earth. A thousand stars were ablaze; a slip of a moon had glided into the sky. In the west, was a glimmer of afterglow. The leaves rustled continuously in a beneficent breeze.

But, to Celia, George was a mystery more profound than these. He thought things out on his own! Perhaps that's what he'd done about the furniture.

Now, furniture was the solitary subject on which George and Celia disagreed, consequently they had not referred to it for some time. George didn't "hold with" buying it on hire purchase and, no matter what arguments Celia adduced in support of that celebrated system, he stuck to the formula that he didn't "hold with" it. When she had objected that, unless he changed his mind, they wouldn't be able to marry for years, he had retaliated with the succinct statement that he was "saving." And when she counter-attacked with the mathematically-perfect argument that, at his present rate of saving, they'd be lucky if they married in 1939, George had not retreated one inch.

They left the bridge and walked slowly towards Hyde Park Corner but, before they had gone a hundred yards, George said:

"You've upset me, you have."

"George!"

"Yes, you have. Falling in love with another bloke after we're married!"

"But I was only *supposing*!"

"I know you was only supposing. But fancy being *able* to suppose a thing like that! I see what's happened. You've altered."

"I haven't!"

"You want some foreign bloke to fall in love with you."

"I don't, George, I don't! I'd be scared."

"You've altered."

"I *haven't*. You mustn't say things like that. A girl couldn't love a fellow more than I love you. You know that—you know that! Don't you?"

Her arms were round him ; her face raised ; earnest apprehensive eyes explored his.

" You could only suppose a thing like that because of all this rumpus about that Hi-talian."

" You don't know what you mean to me. You don't—you can't ! "

There were tears in her eyes.

He took her elbows, then studied her with an attempt at impartiality.

After a long silence, he announced :

" You're all right, you are."

Bar one superlative statement, this was the highest praise in George's vocabulary.

She gazed at him ecstatically.

" I wish we were married."

" Ah, so do I ! "

" But I don't see how we can be—for years."

" I'm saving, I tell you ! "

" Yes, yes, you're saving ! It'll be all right. Everything's going to be all right—always ! "

They clung to each other.

Then, with measured emphasis, came George's superlative statement :

" I couldn't get on without you. Not for a day."

" And I couldn't get on without you. Not for an hour."

Then, after rapturous silence : " Nearly ten, George."

" That's right."

When they reached the block of flats, she held up her lips to be kissed.

" You look after yourself. See ? "

" You too. Same place, George, Wednesday ? "

" Same place—Wednesday."

CHAPTER V

SNAPSHOTS

I

For the last two months the Dawes had been living in the little flat near Bond Street and seemed likely to remain undisturbed, as the lady from Woking was " Far too worried to think of coming to town."

They had been talking about her, over cocktails, on this October evening; or, rather, Marjorie had tried to discuss her, but Dawes had dismissed the subject with the remark that "The more freedom most women get, the greater slaves they become."

It was apparent that the Dawes were still prosperous, and equally apparent that they had different dinner plans, for Marjorie was in evening clothes whereas Dawes wore a blue serge suit.

He stood with his back to the fire, a drink within reach, while Marjorie sat in an armchair. For some moments she had looked up at him with a puzzled, almost apprehensive, expression.

"I can't make head or tail of it, Ralph. You seem to have plenty of money, but where it comes from I can't imagine, because the old game's dead and buried."

"Would you like to know?"

"No! I don't want to. I'm scared enough as it is."

"Scared?"

"Yes. And I'm not easily scared, as you know. We've done plenty of tough things, but, lately, I'm half-afraid of you."

"Is that why you've been faithful—lately?"

"How do you know I have been?"

"Just a hunch."

"You know I have. You know everything about every one! Now, if I ask you something, will you answer?"

"Yes."

"And tell the truth?"

"I've never lied to you."

"Well, I've never lied to you."

"Twice—to be exact."

She stared at him with such undisguised astonishment that he laughed, then said:

"What's your question?"

"Whatever it is you're doing to get money; are you doing it for me?"

"Yes."

She gazed at him with an expression in which surprise and admiration struggled for supremacy.

"Suppose I died suddenly, what would you do?"

"Listen, my dear girl. There's no need for melodrama. It's simply a fact, as I've told you before, that you happen to

be the only human being I care tuppence about. But there's no need to tell others that."

The words were said casually enough, but Marjorie knew she had received an order.

"In fact," he went on, "none of our conversations are to be quoted to others."

After a silence, she said slowly:

"What frightens me about you is that, a few months ago, I'd have sworn I knew you. And now I don't."

"You ought to be grateful to be married to a man who combines the stability of a husband with the elusiveness of a lover. Now, that's enough nonsense. Smoke another cigarette and listen to me."

Marjorie crossed her legs, then lit a cigarette from the light he handed her. Dawes, having glanced with connoisseur detachment at her remarkably well-shaped legs in their thin stockings, began to pace slowly to and fro, rattling the coins in his pockets.

"The Merle affair will come to a climax soon and——"

"But listen, Ralph!"

"No. You listen. It will come to a climax soon. That's certain. What isn't quite so certain is the form that climax will take. You'd better tell me anything Merle says, whether it seems important to you or not."

"Well, here's something she's always asking. Why don't you go to see her?"

"Tell her I'll turn up when she really wants me. Happy people usually get along quite well without me. And Merle's still happy, isn't she?"

"You know she is—radiantly happy."

"Yes. And I know why."

"What on earth does that mean?"

"And Brent must know why. After all, he's practically a professional psychologist—although his last book isn't up to form. Far from it. But that's by the way."

After a pause, he went on:

"Oliver is now completely muddled, partly through seeing so much of Brent—partly through drinking too much—and partly through having nothing to do."

"I've made one discovery about you, Ralph."

"And that is?"

"You loathe Oliver. And you loathe Wade. And everything they stand for. You loathed their type when

you were in the army, but you loathe them more nowadays."

He came to a standstill, then stood looking down at her.

"I'm not interested in what I thought when I was in the army. So, perhaps, you won't refer to it."

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Just a whim of mine. You look more delightful even than usual and I wish that was all I need notice but, you'll agree, it's time we had a business talk. It's necessary to have one sometimes. But don't worry. I'll see you're not late for your dinner date."

He mixed more drinks, then stood with his back to the fire. After a silence, he said casually :

"Wade's coming home soon."

"That interests you?"

"As I've so often said, everything interests me. Wade's been away much longer than he expected."

"About four months, isn't it? I bet Ursula's had enough of it."

"Ursula was sent home some time ago. Wade found someone much more—exciting."

"You never told me. How do you know?"

"He sent a line to the club some weeks ago. He didn't mention the lady's name. Yesterday, I had a card from him saying he is returning to London almost immediately."

Then, after a pause :

"But the point is, Marjorie, that we happen to know the new lady whom Wade finds so exciting."

"We *know* her!"

"Yes. Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Who is she?"

"Dolores."

She shot to her feet.

"*Dolores!*"

"Yes. Isn't it odd how things happen? I'm telling you all this only for one reason. You'll be seeing Wade soon and, naturally, you won't say that we know Dolores—should he mention her name, which isn't likely."

"And suppose we run into her with him?"

"We shan't. But, if we do, I fancy you'll find she's forgotten us."

"My God! Dolores!"

He looked at his watch.

"I'll get your coat. You'll have to go."

He returned almost immediately with a fur coat he had given her a week or two ago.

He helped her into it, then, seeing she was looking at him with an odd expression, he asked :

" Well, what is it ? "

" Can't think why I'm fonder of you than I've ever been."

" Perhaps it's because you're a little scared of me. Women are very primitive. Now, run along. And enjoy yourself."

Then, as she did not move, he added :

" Aren't you going ? "

" I'm wondering what you're doing to-night."

" Nothing very much. Having a snack meal, then I'm meeting a man in a pub."

" Any one I know ? "

" I don't think so. He's a doctor."

" What's his name ? "

" Vance."

2

Although trams crossed the bridge continually, and although traffic rattled along the embankment, Chelsea seemed remote from London. An afternoon haze caressed contours—haunted the loveliness of tawny trees—while October sunshine made the Thames a river in Eldorado.

Merle and Brent were leaning on the low embankment wall, apparently intent on passing tugs or wheeling gulls, but, actually, their thoughts had no relation to environment, for Merle was thinking of Paris—while Brent kept telling himself that he was the biggest fool ever born.

After a prolonged silence, Merle said :

" Isn't it queer that we're here like this ? How long have we known each other ? "

" About twenty years."

" And all the time this meeting was coming nearer. And, now, here we are ! Wonder what our last meeting will be."

" I'm not bothering about that. Why I didn't guess that you've been seeing Yashvin lately. I can't think ! Damn it ! I might have known that nothing else could have made you so happy."

" You're not to tell any one. You promised."

" I shan't tell any one. Who on earth do you think I'd tell ? What gets me is that I didn't guess."

Then he added :

"You've told me so much, Merle, that you may as well tell me everything. Is Yashvin still here?"

"He's in Paris. But I'll see him again before he goes back to Verna."

"And then?"

"I'll join him before Christmas. Everything will be straightened out by then. He'll send for me."

"Has he said so?"

"I know he will."

She turned to him impetuously, then demanded:

"You think he will, don't you? Don't you?"

There was such intensity in tone and expression that Brent said quickly: "Yes, yes, of course! You're convinced, so that settles it."

After a pause, she said slowly: "If this hadn't happened to me, Rod, I'd never have believed it. I'd never have believed I could love a man so much that everything I knew before meeting him is just wiped out. It's frightening! I look at Oliver—and scarcely recognise him."

"Perhaps that's why your meetings with him were such a flop."

"I told you we'd nothing to say to each other. I told you we'd *never* had anything to say to each other. But you all bothered me to meet him—so I met him. And pretty ghastly it was for both of us."

They began to stroll towards Battersea Bridge but before they had gone many yards she asked:

"Will you put all this in a book?"

"For God's sake don't talk about books!"

"Why not? Your latest is out and is doing very well, isn't it?"

"I should think that's very likely."

"What are the reviews like?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Well, I only asked. I haven't read it yet—but Dawes has."

"Dawes has?"

"Yes. But you mustn't repeat that. Marjorie told me in confidence."

"What the devil can it matter who knows that he's read it?"

"It does matter. I don't know why, but it does. So don't say anything."

"That suits me."

Then she asked: "Have you met Dawes alone yet?"

"No, only with others."

"And you still think he's queer?"

"I'm quite certain he is."

After a silence, he went on:

"Wade's coming back. Did you know?"

"No. So he's coming back. He will see quite a lot of Oliver—although they dislike each other. That's typical. I've got to get away from the whole lot of them. It's my only chance."

A moment later, she stopped and said:

"I'll have to go back. Agatha's coming to tea."

"That mother of yours is a mystery to me. Doesn't she ever give you any advice?"

"Often—and always different. At the minute, she's all for my going back to Oliver. She's had an argument with Daphne—almost a row. Agatha thinks it would make things humdrum again if I went back, so she keeps telling me to go back."

"You still haven't seen Daphne?"

"No, and I don't want to. I'd rather she stayed out of this."

When they reached the entrance to the flats, Merle asked:

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

"I haven't the slightest idea?"

"Why not go and see Harry Green? He's not been too good lately, so it's lonely for him. Didn't you say you'd go to his flat sometime?"

"I did. And I'm going now. I'm not a bit keen on being alone."

"Good-bye, Rod."

"Good-bye, bless you."

3

Brent walked briskly up the King's Road but, when he reached Sloane Square, a news-poster brought him to a standstill.

GERMANY LEAVES THE LEAGUE.

He bought a paper, glanced at the headlines—saw that Hitler had declared: "The world has persecuted us with lies"—then walked slowly on towards Knightsbridge.

Germany had walked out of the League. An epoch had come to an end. Brent had no doubt about that. He remembered an argument he had had, a year ago, with a man who had stressed the fact that only the financial clauses of the Versailles Treaty had lapsed—the territorial clauses were still operative. Brent had argued that the dynamite in the Versailles Treaty was that it had humiliated the most neurotic nation in Europe. Those Humiliation Clauses would produce incalculable results. Politicians never mentioned them, because English public men, being gentlemen—or being determined to be mistaken for gentlemen—know nothing about the underground effects of humiliation.

As he walked on, he reminded himself of the spectacular news which had recently come from Europe. September had brought another Hitler proclamation against the Jews, accompanied by the comment that "Germany had escaped the Bolshevik terror by a hair's-breadth." September had also brought a crisis in the Disarmament Conference—and the Reichstag Fire Trial. Not long ago, Dollfuss had been shot.

But, when he reached Knightsbridge, he dismissed all this from his thoughts. Brent had long been certain that a century of war and revolution confronted unfortunate humanity, consequently it did not surprise him that the psychological guns had ceased to mutter and begun to roar.

A few minutes later, he reached Hyde Park Corner. As he entered the lift and asked the man to take him to the sixth floor, he decided that Merle had been inspired when she had suggested he should go to see Harry Green. To visit Green was to enter another age.

Somewhat to Brent's surprise, the door was opened by Celia who explained that, as the old man had not been well, she often spent some time with him in the afternoon.

Green was in the sitting-room and his welcome to Brent showed pleasure at the latter's unexpected appearance. They had met several times in Markham's flat and, at their first meeting, Green had felt at ease with Brent. The old man instantly detected contempt or patronage, no matter how subtly masked by surface manners, but, sensing neither in Brent, he felt unconstrained in his company.

Having noted that Green looked very frail, which emphasised the distinction of the white hair and the fervour of the blue eyes, and having been impressed by the ornate splendour of the old man's dressing-gown, Brent studied the

photographs of departed stage celebrities. He looked from one row to the next, till the line from *Hamlet* began to circle in his mind: "And a man's life's no more than to say 'one.'"

"As you've come," Green announced in a high-pitched quavering voice, "we won't have tea here. We'll have it in what I call the library. Do you mind if Celia has tea with us?"

"Mind! Of course not! I'd like it."

While Green was telling Celia where she would find the Scotch shortbread, which he reserved for gala occasions, Brent watched them. There was something moving in the contrast between the frail old man and the vital young girl—something moving in his dependence on her, and in her attitude to him. Celia was Green's last romance. His many passionate episodes had culminated in the necessity for this girl's presence—and only for her presence.

The "library" was a long room, one wall of which was nearly hidden by a walnut bookcase.

Being curious to discover the quality of Green's literary taste, Brent glanced at the titles and found he was confronted by the Nineties.

While the old man explained that some of the books had been given to him and that he had not read all of them, Brent looked at a complete set of *The Yellow Book*, then at first editions of Dowson, Johnson, Davidson, Stephen Phillips, Richard Le Gallienne, Crossland, Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas—and at albums of Beardsley, Max Beer-bohm, James Pryde, Phil May, Dudley Hardy, and so on.

When Celia had brought tea, and they were seated at a small circular table, Green began to talk about the Nineties which he had known so intimately and loved so passionately. He spoke in short impressionistic sentences but, as the tremulous voice went on and on, the present retreated and the past returned.

Magically, it seemed to Celia, the West End she knew with its thronged pavements, huge cinemas, vulgar electric signs, crumbled, vanished, and in its place appeared an exclusive West End, uninvaded by the suburbs, with horse-drawn traffic uncontrolled by the police. A West End of tinkling hansoms, lovely ladies with eighteen-inch waists and muffs attached to jewelled chains: a West End which, by night, was frequented by "Johnnies" wearing satin-lined Inverness capes over evening clothes, collapsible top hats,

fobs, diamond studs, gardenias and carrying gold-mounted malacca canes. Sovereigns jingled in their pockets.

With staccato sentences the old man evoked Nash's Regent Street—the old Café Royal with its red plush lounges, marble-topped tables, and almost Parisian exuberance—then conjured from oblivion a London of fogs, barrel organs, German bands, and vanished night clubs: The Corinthian, The Carnation, The Palm.

Having exclaimed: "Thank God, the park hasn't altered outwardly since Brummell's day!" he painted its former glories:—Sunday Church Parade—the high-stepping horses—the idol-like coachmen—the Dalmatian dogs following after. Then he made his listeners see rank and fashion riding in the Row.

They wandered with him through the promenade of the Empire Music Hall—watched the ballet—followed him to an underground continental beer café, where gilded youth bought drinks for the ladies of the town. They supped in marvellous mixed company at Romano's. Then, in a flash, were meeting celebrities in the Old Ship Hotel, Brighton. Almost immediately, they were spending Sunday on the river in a cushioned punt—dreaming in shadowy backwaters—dining at Skindle's—returning to town. A moment later, they were being entertained at the Alhambra, the Tivoli, or the London Pavilion, by a host of music hall stars: Marie Lloyd, Albert Chevalier, Dan Leno, Little Tich, T. E. Dunville. They watched Lottie Collins in a tempestuous whirl of frills, dance to the roistering refrain of "Ta-ra-ra-boom-dé-ay."

They listened to anecdote after anecdote, to scandal after scandal. They went to Ascot, the year the Gold Cup was stolen: they heard horrific accounts of the Midnight Murders of Jack the Ripper. They were at the opening night of The National Sporting Club—they had stalls for the first performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

When, at last, the tremulous voice ceased, it seemed strange to hear motor buses in the street below.

Green and Brent began to exchange travellers' stories and were soon comparing impressions of Vienna, Prague, Budapest, and a dozen other cities. To Celia, who had never been abroad, all this seemed like the conversation of magicians and she began to realise how remote were the lives of these men from those of people in her environment.

Green and Brent were educated ; they had travelled ; what they accepted as normal would have been adventure on a magic carpet for her. She resented the knowledge that, in all probability, she would visit none of these cities, whose strange-sounding names starred the darkness of her ignorance like brief and brilliant fireworks. No, she would not go to any of these places. She remembered George had once said : " It's only war what sends blokes like me abroad."

Did he want to travel ? " Really want to travel ? She doubted if he ever gave a thought to the world beyond England. He certainly never mentioned it. He had few desires and no curiosity. But, although Celia recognised this, there was no conscious criticism in her outlook on George. Before her seventeenth birthday, she had been wholly in love with him, consequently he was inalienably identified with the rapturous emotions she had experienced. George, therefore, occupied a celestial category. Comparisons were as inapplicable to him as to the sun.

Meanwhile the old man was deriving rare satisfaction from his talk with Brent. Being an immensely rich sensuous nature, Green possessed a hoard of impressions, none of which he could formulate. All his perceptions were on the emotional plane, which explains his dependence on women and his attraction for them. It also explains his sensitivity to antagonism. But Brent, being highly articulate, could give precise expression to the old man's instinctive knowledge—and that was a rare experience for Green and an exciting one.

" I don't care what you say," the quavering voice exclaimed, " women aren't men and their attempt to copy them will end in disaster. You'll see. You'll live to see it. It's suicide. That's what it is. Suicide ! "

" Well, I can tell you something about that because, when I was in America recently, I saw the typescript of a book by a distinguished doctor. He contends that there is an absolute difference between men and women—an absolute difference caused by the very structure of the tissues. The whole of a woman's organism is impregnated by different substances. This doctor holds that men differ profoundly from women. Every cell in a woman's body bears the seal of her sex. Her nervous system is entirely different from that of a man. This doctor emphatically asserts that physiological laws will not alter to accommodate feminist theories. He contends that the same mental and physical training,

the same ambitions, should not be given to girls as to boys. There are irrevocable differences between the sexes."

"There you are! What more do you want? I tell you it's suicide. Suicide!"

"Well, that's what this doctor wrote. All I'll say is that the only possibility of harmony, it seems to me, lies in the creating of spiritual equilibrium between a man and a woman. But let's look at it from another level. We used to be told that all atoms consist of definite numbers of positive and negative electrons. We're also told that all light wave-lengths are caused by changes in position of electrons within atoms. So what would happen if negative electrons tried to become positive? The return of chaos and old night, presumably. Anyhow, it's a damned odd thing that although women's attempt to become men is hailed with delight, the converse is not the case. If a man tries to become a woman, he is instantly called a number of unpleasant names—and chiefly a floral one."

After a pause, Brent went on:

"There's already antagonism between the sexes and, soon, there'll be roaring war. But what's really coming is a neuter sex—a vast horde of neuters. The machine is boss—and the machine demands uniformity. At the rate we're going, human beings will soon be as like and as interchangeable as sparking plugs in a car."

Then Brent added:

"But you're all right, Green. You've had your life. Your best years were lived before the Earthquake Era. You've kept all your illusions. You're the luckiest man I know. Your philosophy is—Frills. And, perhaps, once frills are discarded, there isn't a lot left. You're a romantic who has stayed the course. I'm not surprised you like Merle."

The old man rose, then began to wander, rather unsteadily, about the room. The reference to Merle had evidently disturbed him.

At last he said:

"I'm worried about her. She's too happy. And there's something else. I thought this Yashvin affair was a romance like those of the old days. But it isn't. No, it isn't. It's desperate."

"Desperate!" Brent echoed.

"She told me—you mustn't repeat this, either of you—she told me that if Yashvin doesn't send for her, she won't

go on living. She wasn't excited when she said that. I tell you I don't like it."

Then, pointing to the floor, he went on :

"And he's queer too. Yes, Markham is queer."

"Have you noticed that, Celia?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Brent! He's been worse ever since Mr. Dawes came to see him some weeks ago. He makes me sit with him after dinner. And he talks to himself—quite a lot sometimes."

After a pause, she continued :

"I don't tell George half that goes on. If I did, he wouldn't let me stay. But I say you've got to help people—and you don't help them by running away when they need you most."

"You're a good girl, Celia."

"Yes, she is a good girl. I don't know what I'd do without her. I've been ill, you know, and I'd be lonely if she didn't come up in the afternoon. Yes, lonely."

Celia and Brent left together. Directly they were alone, he said :

"There's something you didn't say about Markham."

"Lor! Aren't you quick!"

"What was it?"

"He's scared. He has been for weeks."

She hesitated, then went on :

"A few days ago, he says to me: 'You're to do anything Mr. Dawes tells you. Understand?' He did give me a look when he said that. Made me go hot and cold all over. Whew! Was I glad to get away!"

4

Markham was waiting for Wade, but had forgotten the fact as he stood by the window staring down at the November park.

His appearance had altered notably during the last few weeks. The features had shrunk and tautened—with the result that the melancholy eyes were more prominent—and his movements had a heaviness which denoted mental and physical inertia.

The discovery that Dawes knew about Flora, and knew everything relating to his birth and upbringing, had had a devastating effect on Markham. He was wholly in this man's power, and the casual manner in which Dawes

exercised that power revealed how fully he realised its extent.

Yet Dawes employed none of a blackmailer's customary methods. He never asked for money: Markham offered it. And, on each occasion, he had offered it after Dawes had made a reference to the fact that he was seeing Vance—and that Vance was hard up. This had become the recognised formula, masking a monetary demand, but there was no fundamental change in Dawes's manner. He never threatened—never indicated that Markham was under compelling necessity to meet his needs. And it was because he did none of these things that Markham did everything to placate him. If a man never asks for anything, it is difficult to know if he is satisfied.

But the financial aspect of their new relationship was the one which worried Markham least. What disturbed him most was the existence of Vance. Vance knew that Flora had killed herself owing to a man named Markham, and Vance might discover that the Markham concerned was himself. In fact, Dawes might have told him. What did they talk about when they met? Why did they meet? Dawes did not spend time with a derelict doctor for nothing. According to Dawes, the only link between Vance and himself was Flora, but they certainly did not meet regularly in order to discuss a woman who had been dead for twelve years.

Instinctively, Markham feared the unknown Vance, but he had other fears almost as menacing. For instance, it depended wholly on Dawes whether or not Merle learned the truth about Flora. It also depended wholly on Dawes whether Merle discovered that he, Markham, was half a foreigner. Why had pride prevented him from telling Merle these things when he had proposed to her? It would have been so simple then—so impossible now. If she found out the facts, his moral indignation about Yashvin would seem ludicrous at the best, and hypocritical at the worst.

He could imagine her rapier attack.

'So *you* are a foreigner! Well, well! It's odd that you loathe them. So you object to my love for Boris? You—who threw a woman away, like a cigarette end, because you wanted to marry me! And, now, you stage a contortionist act—and appear as a moralist!'

Whatever it involved, Merle must not discover the truth.

There was no vestige of doubt about that, for he staked everything on her return.

He had no alternative. All his life, Markham had had clearly defined objectives, because they were a temperamental necessity, and it was imperative for him to see light at the end of the tunnel now. Consequently he had convinced himself that every problem would vanish with Merle's return. He focused the whole of his hope on this myth. He hypnotised himself with the belief that her return would effect a transformation scene.

Markham had to delude himself with this dream. The need for delusion was so overwhelming that he ignored every fact which would dissipate this castle in the air. He refused to remember that, when he met Merle, they had nothing to say to each other. He outlawed the knowledge that her return would leave him as deeply in Dawes's power as he was at present. It had become a psychological necessity to visualise deliverance, so Markham drugged himself with the phantasy that his martyrdom would end with Merle's return.

"Mr. Wade, sir."

Markham started, then a feeling of inadequacy almost overwhelmed him. Nowadays, he needed to armour himself before encountering the impact of another's personality, but, on this occasion, he had no cause for concern.

It was a very jubilant Wade who strode into the room, wearing the jauntiest of new suits. A Wade far too self-centred and far too self-satisfied to be more than superficially aware of his companion.

"Here I am, Oliver! And have I had a time! Have I *not*! But don't ask too many questions, old boy, because it's all very hush-hush. You can take that from me."

He mixed a drink, then turned and looked at Oliver. Having emitted a low whistle, he exclaimed:

"God! You don't look so hot! What in hell have you done to yourself? Still, I don't mean to shove my nose where it's not wanted. I did that the last time I was here and I'm not doing it again."

He flung himself into an armchair, took a generous pull at his drink, then lit a cigarette with a flourish.

Markham stood scowling at him. Wade's vanity was in full plumage and Markham found the exhibition repellent.

At last he managed to ask:

"So you've had a good time, have you?"

"A good time! I've hit a new high, Oliver."

"Is that why you stayed away longer than you expected?"

"You bet it is!"

"Did Ursula enjoy it as much as you did?"

"Ursula's nothing to do with anything."

"I thought you took her with you."

"You don't get it, Oliver. I sent Ursula packing after a very short time. I tell you I ran into something super. I've never struck anything like it—and I've had plenty of experience. She's got everything. Just—everything!"

Almost immediately, he went on:

"I was telling Dawes about her this morning. But no names, mind! Not me! This is hush-hush—and it's got to stay hush-hush. Still, I told Dawes all I could. She's something super all right—or I wouldn't have broken the rule of a lifetime to run around with her."

Wade finished his drink, then got another. When he had returned to his chair, he said:

"Never knew I was alive till this happened. Why don't you find something—and snap out of all this?"

"I told you why, the last time you were here."

"All right, all right! Stay put if you want to. I've only run in to say one thing—and you can take it or leave it. It doesn't matter to me."

"Well, let's have it."

"Dawes tells me that things are much the same with you as they were before I went away. Merle's still at Chelsea—still waiting for that feller to send for her. You're still seeing a lot of that chap Brent—and letting everything go to hell. Well, I'm not asking you to listen to me, because I know that's useless, but I *am* suggesting that you get some expert advice."

"What do you mean by that—exactly?"

"Listen, Oliver. Go to a damned good lawyer. You've heard of Spencer Oliphant—head of Oliphant, Percival, Brasenose, and Hardcastle. Go and see him. He's a huge divorce practice. I'm not suggesting you instruct him to divorce Merle, because I know you won't do that—God knows why, but you won't. Still, a feller like Spencer Oliphant could give you expert advice—a damned sight better than that chap Brent, who's half-cracked anyway. Damn it! if you were ill, you'd go to a good doctor—not to a

quack—wouldn't you? For God's sake get expert advice! You can't go on fiddling about for ever."

"Did you tell Dawes you were going to suggest this?"

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. Dawes isn't a fool. He knows he wouldn't get any thanks if he shoved his nose into your affairs."

Over a minute passed before Markham said:

"I'll give it a fortnight. If nothing's happened by then, I'll go and see Spencer Oliphant."

"Now you're talking! Well, I'll have to run along. I've plenty to arrange, and there can't be any mistakes. But I wouldn't have missed a minute of the last few weeks. Not one minute! God! What a woman!"

5

A week later. . . .

Markham had risen and now stood facing Agatha with an expression of extreme perplexity.

"You mean," he began, but Agatha cut in:

"I mean what I say. Merle's collapsed. She looks just as she did before she tried to commit suicide. She's got the same fixed look that she had then. That's why I've come to you. I'm not taking the responsibility if she's left alone any longer."

"It's not my fault if she's alone, is it?"

"There's no need to shout. You're still her husband. I've told you what I think, so it won't be my responsibility if anything terrible happens. I called in a doctor and——"

"What's he say?"

"He says she's been living in a state of nervous tension for a long time and that she's no reserves left."

"Did you tell him about her throwing herself from that window?"

"Of course I did. *He* says she needs change of air and rest. And someone to look after her."

"What does Merle say?"

"She is absolutely indifferent—just as she was at Highgate. Just stares in front of her for hours. She's no will of her own. I keep telling you that she's *just like she was then*."

"I suppose that blackguard has stopped writing to her."

"I don't know and it's no good asking her, because she won't say anything."

"I'm going to see her."

"Go, if you like, but you'll do more harm than good. The doctor says that any excitement might have serious results. He thinks she should go to somewhere like Hove, with a nurse-companion to keep a sharp eye on her—and to see that she gets all the rest she can."

"If that's what he says, that's what we'll have to do. I'll get her a suite at the Metropole. And I'll tell the doctor to find a companion for her—someone he knows and trusts. Give me his name and address. I'll go and see him now."

CHAPTER VI

MR. SPENCER OLIPHANT

.I

BEING in a state of perplexity, Brent looked first at the books on his shelves, then at the writing table, then at his typewriter covered with a black hood and, finally, out of the window. It was nearly noon—a feeble sun hung in a frosty sky—and, for the tenth time, Brent told himself that he ought to go for a sharp walk in the park before lunch.

Nevertheless, he remained irresolute. Yesterday, he had seen Merle at the Metropole, Hove, and had returned to town seriously alarmed. She seemed in a state of almost total prostration and he had had the utmost difficulty in persuading her to speak. During the early part of his visit he had not been certain that she recognised him and, after leaving her, the nurse-companion had not reassured him by revealing that Merle often remained silent for hours and had to take drugs in order to get any sleep.

He began to pace slowly up and down, his hands clasped behind his back.

Oliver had seen the doctor recently and was therefore aware of Merle's condition, nevertheless Brent felt that he should telephone and give an account of his visit but, to do this, would inevitably involve a meeting with Oliver—and Brent wanted to be alone. Merle must not remain in her present state. That was definite and——

But at this point the telephone bell rang.

He picked up the receiver.

Oliver!

"Listen, Rod. The doctor rang me last night and said Merle's condition was precarious. That's the word he used. How did you find her?"

"I don't think the doctor's wrong."

"Well, I'm going to talk straight. I've followed your advice for months—and it hasn't got me anywhere. So there's going to be a change. I've just consulted Spencer Oliphant, the well-known lawyer, and I'm going to do what he suggests."

"What's that?"

"He's sending a man to Verna—to scare the life out of Mr. Boris Yashvin."

"That suits me."

"You agree, then?"

"No, I don't, but it suits me—because it lets me out. And I want to get out."

"You *don't* agree!"

"Listen, Oliver. You've consulted this man and you're going to take his advice. That's settled. You remember the first evening you came here? I told you, then, my instinct was not to get into this Merle—Yashvin business. And my instinct, now, is to get out of it—just as quick as I can."

"But—but——"

"There aren't any buts. You say this Oliphant is a well-known lawyer. You've told him the facts and he's advised you. That's all there is to it—and it lets me out."

"I told him the facts about Yashvin. Oh look here, Rod! I don't know what I'm saying or what I'm doing! You'd better come and see Oliphant this afternoon."

"What the hell for?"

"To tell him why you don't agree."

"A fat lot he'll care! He'll think you're cracked to fix something with him this morning—and then turn up this afternoon with an amateur who doesn't agree with him."

"I don't care a damn what he thinks! What's Merle going to say if you walk out? You've got to lunch with me at the club, then we'll see Oliphant this afternoon. I'll telephone him now."

"Oh, all right! But I hope to God he sticks to his guns!"

castle were on the first floor of a Georgian house in a distinguished square not very far from the Law Courts.

Just inside the entrance was a white board on which the names of the many partners were inscribed in bold black letters. The array was a formidable one. Every client confronted by it suddenly felt less than life-size. Also, there was something formidable about the reputation of this famous firm which had figured in so many notorious cases, and had represented so many eminent persons in so many spectacular divorce actions.

The shallow stone steps ; the white, chaste, closed doors—even the silence—patronised you. They were eternal : you were ephemeral. Clients might come ; clients might go—but Oliphant, Percival, Brasenose, and Hardcastle went on for ever.

Mr. Spencer Oliphant, the head of the firm, was an aesthetic figure whom it would be impossible to imagine in any setting other than the spacious, high-pitched, panelled room overlooking the disciplined garden of the distinguished square. He was nearly sixty, although many assumed him to be ten years younger. The hair was grey at the temples, but the highly intelligent features, the bright eyes, the spare erect figure, revealed no sign of weariness and certainly none of decay. The ability of the man was as apparent as the class to which he belonged. There could be no vestige of doubt that Mr. Spencer Oliphant was the head of this eminent firm. And there could be no vestige of doubt that Mr. Spencer Oliphant was fully aware of the fact.

In ten minutes it would be half-past three and, at three-thirty, Markham was due to arrive with some person who questioned the wisdom of Mr. Spencer Oliphant's advice. That was refreshingly amusing ; so much so, that the delicate eyebrows were slightly raised and the thin lips slightly pursed as if to restrain a smile. It was uniquely amusing, but everything relating to Markham had its ludicrous aspect.

In the first place he was not a gentleman, and any one who was not a gentleman slightly amused Mr. Spencer Oliphant. On the other hand Markham was rich, and that was an extenuating circumstance. One had to be fair. The lawyer had known Markham's uncle—Sir Marmaduke Markham—and had had the highest regard for him. Sir Marmaduke had ability and, which was rarer, taste. Indeed, if Mr. Spencer Oliphant's excellent memory served him, the

only mistake which Sir Marmaduke had committed had been the bestowing of patronage on his nephew, Oliver—the offspring of a ne'er-do-well brother and an obscure Portuguese woman.

Soon, however, as he continued to stand by the window, contemplating the square with proprietorial satisfaction,* his thoughts reverted to their favourite theme.

This theme was the pleasure he derived from the spectacle of human folly. His profession, and the nature of his practice, provided endless opportunities for the study of mortal frailty, consequently his pleasure was perpetual. It pleased him to be daily reminded how remote he was from the vices of other men—to contrast their stormy experiences with the serenities of his harbour existence. With him, everything was precisely as it should be. His health, his birth, his means, his place in the country, his wife, all conformed with accepted standards. True, his youngest son, when an Oxford undergraduate, had become a convert to Communism, but, nowadays, even the sons of Cabinet Ministers are addicted to that aberration. No! Weakness, folly, stupidity, were outlawed from Mr. Spencer Oliphant's well-ordered life—although he spent most of his time advising those held in the tentacles of that malignant trinity.

The case of Oliver Markham gave him peculiar satisfaction, for it was impossible to imagine greater absurdity or more crass ineptitude. His wife goes abroad; falls in love with an adventurer; leaves home. Clearly, any man of minimum intelligence would have divorced her immediately. But what had the fatuous Markham done? Allowed months to elapse without obtaining authoritative advice! Simply grotesque! And, an hour after obtaining authoritative advice, the demented Markham telephones for another appointment, saying he wants "to bring a friend along" who does not agree with the professional opinion of Oliphant, Percival, Brasenose, and Hardcastle!

Richly amusing! But it also proved that, apart from money-making ability, people like Markham really were the most stupendous fools.

He glanced at his watch, then crossed to the table and sat down.

Nearly three-thirty. Markham, and the person he was bringing, would arrive any minute now. It would be

interesting to see how he would excuse his childish vacillation.

On arrival, however, Markham merely made the staccato announcement that his friend, Brent, did not agree with the decision to send a man to Verna and, as he didn't agree, he had brought him along.

The lawyer glanced with olympian detachment at the individual thus indicated, and instantly recoiled with well-bred aversion. Not only was this person untidy in appearance, but his whole attitude made it abundantly clear that he was genuinely unimpressed by his surroundings. Indeed, he seemed unaware of them as he sat, uninvited, on the arm of a period chair, smoking a cigarette—without ascertaining whether any objection existed to this indulgence.

Mr. Spencer Oliphant rose, tucked his thumbs into the openings of his waistcoat, then said to Markham :

"If I understand you correctly—which, I confess, seems improbable—you want to reopen the decision we reached this morning."

"This is the position," Brent rapped out. "I've come to tell you certain things—and I hope to God you'll think them irrelevant. Then I'll get out of this business, which is exactly what I want to do. And the sooner the better. I know what Markham's told you about Yashvin, but I'm going to tell you the psychological situation, then you can see what you think of the idea of sending a man to Verna—to scare the pants off Boris Yashvin."

This crudely-announced programme relegated the lawyer to the rôle of listener and, to be obliged to listen, caused Mr. Spencer Oliphant acute mental discomfort. So much so, that he had become adept in checking the loquacity of clients, but his technique proved inadequate to the present occasion, so he sat down, closed his eyes, and awaited the barrage.

"These are the background facts. Merle is very romantic, somewhat neurotic, and has therefore always been unhappy. Just before her marriage, she attempted suicide by jumping out of a fourth floor window. Now, for the first time in her life, she's in love—desperately in love. It isn't sexual infatuation. She thinks Yashvin is God."

The lawyer sighed with self-pity.

"We're concerned with her feelings, not yours Right from the beginning of this business I told Markham that he could do one of two things: divorce her; or let

events prove that Yashvin has no proposition to make to Merle. I still say that. What's the position now? She's at the Metropole, Hove, watched day and night, because there's more than a chance that she'll attempt suicide again. This makes several things clear. The most obvious, and the most important, is that Yashvin is trying to do a fade-away. That's why she's collapsed. So, at the very moment when there's a big opportunity of proving to Merle that Yashvin hasn't any proposition to make, you and Markham decide to send a man from this office to scare the life out of Boris Yashvin. I can't think of anything more damned silly."

Silence, brief but shattering.

Brent continued :

"You're going to send a man to scare Yashvin. Either you'll succeed or you won't, but, whichever it is, it will be disastrous. Surely to God that's obvious! At the very moment that Yashvin is trying to stage a get-away, you provide him with a first-class one. Ask yourselves some questions. What's Merle going to think when she gets a letter from Yashvin saying that London lawyers have threatened him—on Markham's instructions? Won't he say that's why he's walking out? And won't her vanity believe it—rather than think that he's tired of her? Of course it will! Her god-like Yashvin, threatened by a lawyer's bully! Yashvin will gallop away down the road you have so obligingly created for him—and *you'll* be left with a Merle who's convinced that her husband slammed the door of paradise in her face!"

Brent lit another cigarette, then went on :

"Neither of you know, of course, whether Yashvin is the type to be frightened, but my point is that it doesn't matter a damn whether you frighten him or not. *You're giving him a get-away.* And you're doing it just at the moment when there's every chance of proving to Merle that Yashvin is clearing out on his own initiative. Well, if you think that's clever, get on with it. But if the result of this masterly manoeuvre is that Merle goes out of another window, don't be surprised. And for God's sake remember that you've either got to get rid of Merle—or deal with her *as she is*. Not as you'd like her to be."

Silence, prolonged and profound.

At last Mr. Spencer Oliphant rose, then said to Markham :

"I must remind you of certain facts. My first advice was

that you should institute divorce proceedings immediately. You were not prepared to do so. You gave an account of your wife's infatuation for this foreigner, but you did not refer to her attempted suicide some years ago, and you gave no indication—certainly no adequate indication—of the extent to which she is neurotic. Inevitably, all advice is in the terms of revealed facts. If material facts are not disclosed, the advice given ceases to be pertinent to the issues involved. That is the situation now. So I revert to my original opinion which, you remember, I abandoned very reluctantly. This is it:—Institute divorce proceedings against your wife immediately. If you do not, I have no hesitation in saying that you will bring absolute ruin upon yourself and upon your children."

"I love my wife, d'you hear? I love her! And there's nothing I won't do to get her back. Nothing!"

Then, to Brent:

"Come on! We'll go. You've convinced me. She won't be able to say that I drove him away. If I do that, she'll live on memories. I want every memory of him killed!"

A moment later, they left.

Mr. Spencer Oliphant moistened his lips several times, then looked round as if in desperate search for a bottle of disinfectant.

Eventually he said, to the spacious serenities of the panelled room:

"Imagine that creature shouting that he's in love with his wife! What incredible vulgarity!"

The door opened and Brasenose appeared.

Brasenose, who had the countenance of an over-educated hawk, paused in order to ascertain whether the moment of his intrusion was a propitious one.

"Come in, Brasenose, come in!"

Then he went on, isolating each word:

"Aren't—people—fools?"

"Frightful," Brasenose replied casually.

Then he added, emphatically:

"Fortunately!"

CHAPTER VII

VISITORS FOR MERLE

I

MERLE's suite at the Metropole was on the third floor and consisted of a "lounge hall," two bedrooms, and an attractively furnished sitting-room with an exhilarating view of the sea. Naturally, it was expensive, but this fact pleased Markham, because it confirmed belief in the power of the only ally he possessed—money.

This confirmation was welcome. During her stay at Chelsea, Merle had lived on her private means but, although the amount left her by Joyce was not inconsiderable, it certainly would not provide a suite at the Metropole. After her collapse, however, she was in no condition to think about the expense involved by her visit to Hove and Markham eagerly accepted the opportunity for reminding her that she was still the wife of a rich man, hoping it would result in reconciliation.

Unfortunately, however, Merle seemed scarcely aware of her surroundings and wholly indifferent to them. She spent days in a state almost of coma; interested only in the coming of the post. Apart from writing a letter every day, she did nothing—never glanced at a newspaper or a book; never listened to the radio; never gave a thought to her appearance. She ate practically nothing and had to take drugs in order to sleep. Eventually, her mental and physical inertia increased so alarmingly that the doctor insisted on every attempt being made to rouse her from a state of "spiritual sleeping sickness." He gave orders that visitors were to be admitted without Merle being informed of their arrival. He told Markham not only to go himself but to induce others to make the journey to Hove, adding that the boys should certainly see Merle if permission could be obtained from their headmaster.

All this was done, without apparent results. Nevertheless, as the doctor had faith in perseverance, people continued to visit Merle—although, often, she seemed only half-aware of their presence.

One December afternoon, Agatha sat in the gaily furnished sitting-room, looking at a grey waste of heaving sea. Neither had spoken for nearly an hour. Merle was in

her customary attitude, lying on a sofa, staring at the ceiling. She had no make-up, the face was thinner, consequently the large eyes were more prominent and their isolation from the other features more pronounced.

As a result of their long silence, each had almost forgotten the other's presence. Merle started therefore when Agatha suddenly said, as if she were continuing her thoughts aloud :

"Men get some happiness, but women don't. Certainly not for long. Sometimes I look back and see that I was happy once. A long time ago."

"When were you happy?"

"When I was a girl—dreaming of the man I'd marry. I was always looking for him. I was certain he was near—quite near. It never occurred to me that all men were like the ones I saw every day. I never thought I'd marry one of them."

Merle looked more closely at the faded figure, sitting near the window, gazing at the sea.

"I was no different from any one else, Merle. Every girl dreams of the coming of a prince. At least they did when I was young. I don't know about to-day. But I do know they're not happy nowadays. Look at them. Listen to them. They're not happy. No woman is—not for long."

"Can't you see I've met the man I used to dream about?"

"Oh, my dear child, what do you think his wife would say if she heard that? What do you think she'd do—laugh or cry? *You* think Boris is God. I'd rather have his wife's opinion."

After a silence Agatha added :

"I told you I had a row with Daphne some time ago. Do you know why? Because something she said made me think she thought there was something extraordinary about your father. I told her it was easy to think that—if you didn't live with him. Which she took very good care not to do. He was a madman if ever there was one."

"He was different with her."

"He'd need to be. I still dream that he's alive. I hear his key in the door—hear his voice—then wake trembling."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Oh Merle, you know how it is! You go to a shop, and they haven't got what you want. So you take something that will do."

After a long silence, Agatha said :

"Give it all up, my child. You've the boys. I lost mine. You'll know what it is to have them, if you lose them. They're going to spend the Christmas holidays with us. They're coming to Highgate. Do you know what that means to Daphne and me? We spend all our time planning how to give them a good time. We've seats for a pantomime—seats for a circus. Daphne is going to make a cake for them—an iced cake. They said they were sorry they weren't spending Christmas with the Montagues, but we're determined they won't be sorry—they'll be glad."

After a pause, she went on :

"Go back to Oliver. He's no worse than the others. Better, perhaps. I never liked him and I'm not pretending to like him now, but he's as good as most—and you've the boys."

"That could have been said to you—once. They'll have another of their wars. That will be the end of the boys. I haven't forgotten those wires that came from the War Office. Two—in the same month."

Neither spoke for some minutes, then Agatha said :

"I remember the day you were born. Remember everything about it. The shape of the clouds through the window—the patter of rain on the leaves—a hawker shouting in the street below. I had a rigor after you were born. Then the nurse brought you in—and I saw you for the first time."

She rose wearily, crossed to the foot of the sofa, then stood with head bent and drooping nerveless hands.

"Give him up, Merle."

"And become like you?"

"Yes—like me."

"I didn't mean that! I didn't mean it, I tell you! I'm so unhappy, mother, I don't know what I'm saying!"

Agatha sat by her side—put her arms round her—rocked her to and fro.

2

Sometimes when she was lying on the sofa in the early afternoon, Merle would sleep for an hour and, on waking, would be very confused about time and place. She would look round, thinking it must be dawn; or she would experience the strange sensation that her awakening had happened in a dream. Probably the drugs which she took

nightly were responsible for this groping return to reality but, on one occasion—two days after Agatha's visit—someone appeared who was so totally unexpected that minutes elapsed before Merle accepted the evidence of her eyes.

She had slept for nearly an hour and had been involved in one of those dreams which compress a life-time of experience in a small circle of time, as recorded by the clock. When she woke, she lay motionless with closed eyes, still held by happenings which refused to dwindle to those of a dream.

At last she opened her eyes—to discover Daphne standing in the open doorway.

For over a minute Merle gazed at this apparition, convinced that it would fade, but, as the moments passed and the figure remained substantial, she eventually said :

" Why have you come ? I want you to keep out of this."

" It's different now."

" Does Agatha know you're here ? "

" No."

Daphne shut the door, took off her coat, then sat in a small armchair.

As Merle watched her, she again marvelled that Agatha had been so impressed by Daphne's resemblance to herself when she was young. The fact that Agatha had misty-blue sentimental eyes, whereas those of Daphne were extraordinarily dark, effectively disposed of any real resemblance. Also, it was easy to imagine Daphne's regular features being suddenly lit with animation—to imagine the dark eyes instantly aflame—the figure vibrant with vitality. Agatha's placidity had belonged to her from birth : Daphne's had been acquired.

Then Merle asked :

" Why is it different now ? "

" You're unhappy. You don't know what to do."

The deep tone seemed to explore the room.

" Besides," Daphne went on, " I've something to show you. Something you ought to see. And there are things I must tell you."

She rose, walked round the room, then stopped by the window.

" I'd like to sit here for hours, looking at the sea. At night I'd lie in bed, listening to the waves."

" You like the sound of waves at night ? "

" Love it ! To lie in the dark, listening ! "

She returned to her chair, then went on :

"I've got to tell you about the first meeting. You knew I met him soon after you tried to commit suicide?"

"No, I didn't know," Merle replied, noting, again, that Daphne always referred to Joyce as 'him'—implying that no other man existed for her.

"I hadn't been in London long—only a few months. My people were still furious I'd left home, but I was excited by having a job, excited by independence. I was dining alone in a restaurant in Lisle Street. It was very full and the only vacant seat was at my corner table. Directly the door opened I looked up. He came in carefully, because he was rather drunk, then came over. I'd always been terrified of drunken men, but I did not mind his coming to my table."

Almost immediately she went on, as if she were describing something she was watching :

"He began to talk as if we'd known each other a long time. Even now I'm amazed I wasn't frightened, because he plunged into a half-coherent account of how his daughter had thrown herself out of a window. But I scarcely heard what he said. His voice held me and there's was sort of humility in his manner."

"Humility!"

"Yes. I was held too by his battered features and angry eyes. And the lines in his face. Most people have standardised lines—caused by worry or age—but his weren't like that. They were individual. They were there because of the life he had lived—not just because he was forty-five. That was our first meeting. Within a year, we were lovers."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I'm going to show you something."

"What is it?"

"The first long letter I had from him."

Merle shot upright, then watched Daphne open her bag, take out an envelope, which she handed her.

She gazed at the handwriting and continued to gaze at it. How many times, when she was at boarding school, had letters come in this handwriting! How often, when he was abroad, had envelopes arrived, bearing foreign stamps, addressed in this hand! Scribbled notes, thrust under her door, saying he was going away! Cheques he had given her! An apology he had once sent her! Illegible scrawls from public houses! Nonsense verses!

She looked at Daphne, her lips quivering.

"Read it. I haven't brought all of it. There are pages and pages. I'll tell you something afterwards."

"You've kept all his letters?"

"All."

Merle took the thin sheets out of the envelope, then read :

"Merle is going to marry—soon. A man called Oliver Markham. I've known him for some years. It won't be a success. But there's nothing I can do about it. I lost the right to be listened to long ago, but, as you know, I admit only two sins; one is that I married; the other is that, having married, I brought children into a world which bewilders and maddens me.

"I love Merle. I've treated her abominably, but that does not alter the fact that I love her. Probably makes my love greater. The trouble with me is that my emotions are too violent to last long. When they carried her in, after she jumped from that window, I was certain she was dead. For three days and nights I was burnt up by remorse. Then I didn't feel anything. If I'd felt less, it would have lasted longer. But this isn't what I want to tell you.

"It won't be a success—this marriage. He's rich and all that, but she's—in a trance. Neither has any idea what the other is like. Clothes, cars, luxury hotels, and so on, won't satisfy Merle. She's not what she looks like. She's the woman who went out of that window. I understand her, but I can't do anything for her.

"People like me, who've 'opened' themselves to every influence, have an odd kind of clairvoyance. They see things they can't prove. I'm like that with Markham. I'm haunted by what I see. So haunted, that I have to tell you about it.

"In a book, I once ran across a phrase which nailed itself to my memory. It's only five words. *The adoption of a lie*. The writer showed how some people adopt a lie—then he revealed the havoc it creates in their lives. It may be some theory they adopt which is alien to their nature; or they may transplant the values of someone who's impressed them. Snobbery, in its extreme form, is an obvious example. You try to become something you're not. You camouflage yourself.

"I'm certain Markham has done this. I've no evidence—no facts. But I'm certain all the same. If he is what he appears to be, he wouldn't marry Merle. That's certain.

He knows her history. He knows she tried to kill herself. And, incidentally, he knows me! Yet he wants to marry her—just as soon as he can. Why? He's a business man, and a tough business man. So he's not running true to form—or what everything else suggests is his form. Merle's told him she doesn't love him. But he's crazy to marry her. He goes on like someone who has found what he's been looking for—looking for it a long time. And it's something no one would dream that he would want. So I'm certain he's camouflaged. He thinks Merle will fill a blank in the secret pattern into which he's twisted his life.' He's wrong. She won't. I feel ill when I see them together. But what can I do? Who'd listen to me? Why should they? I've destroyed everything. . . .

"Listen, my dearest one. You must believe what I say—believe it against all the evidence. I love *order* as few men have loved it. It's this love of order which has made my life so chaotic. That sounds paradoxical, but it's true. Loving order, I loathe the dead routine that usurps it. I'll tell you this too. Men *must* see themselves in a cosmic setting. They must find meaning in their relation to the universe, and in their relations with one another. They must share basic assumptions about these things—otherwise it's the Tower of Babel. Babel is the state in which there are no basic assumptions about anything—in which every man is isolated. It is because I love order that I am often nearly demented. But I'm not so different from other men. Every one of them is alone. I know that I am.

"You must read this, all of it, and take no notice if it jumps from one subject to another.

"We shall become lovers. We knew that at our first meeting. But I want more. Much more. I beg you to live with me, but I know you will refuse. And I know why you will refuse.

"You are convinced that I hate everything belonging to everyday existence. Only the other day you told me that I loathe what most men love—the commonplace, the ordinary, the humdrum. You said that I drink to escape from it—that I mix with outcasts because they're outside it. That was true enough, but it isn't true now.

"Listen! For God's sake, listen!

"That night—the first night we met—why did you start talking as if we were friends? Why did you wander the

streets with me? Why? What I said about Merle's attempted suicide was enough to scare any woman, but you weren't scared. Why not? I was half-drunk and, you say, you're afraid of drunken men, but you weren't afraid of me. Why not? You told me things you had never told any one. Why?

"There was *recognition*. That's why. Recognition, so deep, that we must have met in the world before this. When we are together, a mysterious third is created—who is neither of us, and both of us. You know that's true. You know it's the reason why the barriers between us are thinner than shadows.

"What has happened between us could have happened only between us. You might have any kind of relations with another man, but not our unique relationship.

"You would have to have lived my life to realise what this harmony means to me. It is because I've always been haunted by the possibility of such harmony that I felt an exile in a world of ghosts, phantoms, and crumbling idols. Only those who can imagine paradise recognise hell.

"I beg of you to live with me. I beg you . . ."

The thin sheets fell from Merle's hand.

She could have repeated little of what she had read, for the chief effect of the letter had been to evoke the man who had written it—to evoke him with such clarity that Joyce seemed to be in the room.

Daphne rose, then crossed to the window.

For some minutes she stood, gazing at a shrouded sea, then said:

"It's extraordinary, but intimacy between a man and a woman sometimes results in an exchange of temperaments—or a partial exchange. It did with us. I became more like him; and he became more like me. It was rather frightening. I began to understand things which had always been mysteries. He became less neurotic. He was convinced that, if I would live with him, his whole life would be transformed, but I wouldn't live with him. I understood him too well. I gave him everything except certainty. I daren't give that."

After a silence, she returned to her chair, then said:

"Don't know why I told you all that. It's not what I meant to say. I came to show you that letter—and to tell you something."

But Merle was not listening.

"You're the only one who loved him. That's certain."

"I'm the only one who understood him. You had to become like him to understand him."

Then Daphne added:

"You're like him too. Yes, you are, Merle! That's why I've come. Listen!"

Some moments passed before she said emphatically:

"You ask a lot from life, just as he did. You'd sacrifice every one and everything to get it, just as he would. You have no choice—and he had none. So if you're ill because you're thinking about Oliver—or what others din into you—it's useless. You don't belong to them any more than he did."

She passed a hand rapidly across her forehead, then went on:

"You're the kind that gets only one chance. So am I. Mine came—and I took it. You take yours. It doesn't matter what others say. Look at their lives! Do you want a life like that? There's only one thing worth having—and you have to give everything to get it."

She had spoken quickly, making staccato movements with her hands.

Suddenly Merle said:

"You are like him! He often talked just like that."

A moment later, she added:

"You don't have to worry. No one will stop me going to Boris. But there's something about you I've never understood, and never shall."

"Agatha?"

"Yes."

"Listen! Most of me died when he died. But that doesn't mean I'm unhappy. I'm probably happier than I was with him. Happy people are usually half-dead. Let's put it this way. Suppose Boris died. You'd have to keep links with him. You'd have to! You'd want to be surrounded by the things he'd loved—by people he'd known, whether they'd understood him or not. Well, that's what I did. All the things he treasured are in my room."

After a silence, she went on:

"Do you remember those books about people wrecked on a desert island? They usually managed to survive by getting things from the ship stranded on the rocks. That's

what I've done. I live on salvage. I'm tranquil enough, because I know it's over. It's over—and it's never going to happen again. But it *has* happened. And that's all that matters. It's the only thing in the world. There isn't anything else."

A few minutes later, Daphne went.

The short January day was sinking. There were no pedestrians on the broad Hove promenade and only a glimpse of the sea was visible, although the murmur of waves rose regularly and monotonously.

For over half an hour Merle had stood by the window, watching the slow effacement of the familiar. Soon, all would be claimed by obscurity.

She started when the telephone bell rang, then crossed the room and picked up the receiver.

She gave her name, but almost immediately asked :

"Surely you mean *Mr.* Wade ? "

But the Enquiries clerk in the entrance hall had no doubt whatever that it was *Mrs.* Wade who wanted to see *Mrs.* Markham.

"Oh very well ! Please ask her to come up."

It couldn't be Dollie Wade ! She had met her only two or three times, years ago, just before Wade left her. All Merle could remember was a blonde ; pathetically attempting to be the kind of woman whom, she imagined, her prosperous husband admired. It couldn't be Dollie ! And how could she know anything about Boris, as she never saw Wade nowadays ?

The door opened and a woman appeared whom Merle recognised with difficulty. She stood timorously on the threshold as if in certain expectation of a rebuff. The whole situation was too unusual for conventional greetings and none were exchanged.

Eventually Merle said :

"Please come in. It's so long since we met that it's like starting all over again."

"You haven't altered much."

Merle did not know what to say. She had, of course, met plenty of people who were old as the result of time's treachery, but had not encountered that premature ageing which proceeds from inner withering. It confronted her

now. Dollie Wade had finished with life long ago ; but life had not finished with her yet.

Everything about her had an apologetic air—the faded eyes, the diffident movements, features, expression, clothes—everything. Her whole being was an apology. She seemed to invite insult as she stood listlessly, looking at the carpet.

Sudden sympathy swept Merle.

“ Please sit down.”

When Mrs. Wade was seated, she said nervously :

“ You’ll wonder why I’ve come. I’ve only just heard of the trouble between you and your husband. And—and—I had to warn you. You don’t know what you’re doing. No! You must listen. Please listen.”

She rose in considerable agitation, but, a moment later, sat down and continued in the same nervous tone :

“ You know that my marriage was a success till he made money. You know that he left me. He made me an allowance and left me. You know all that, but you don’t know what my life has been since. Or perhaps you do—now you’ve seen me.”

After a silence, she went on :

“ It’s the loneliness. You can’t imagine it. He doesn’t come back in the evening. He isn’t there at week-ends. There’s nothing to look forward to—nothing that lifts the monotony of the day. No one to talk and plan with. And there’s the—humiliation. Every one knows he doesn’t want me. You cease to be someone—and become something.”

Then, after a pause :

“ I was working in an office when I met him. My people were very ordinary. He was a clerk. We thought it would be heaven if he ever made five pounds a week. We married when he got four. We were perfectly happy. He was ambitious—he’d always been ambitious—but I never thought much about that. Then he was made manager. I couldn’t believe it. He began to be out nearly every night. Soon, he was managing director. I tried to meet the people he knew, but couldn’t say a word to them. I never knew there were people like that. Before long, I practically never saw him. Then he left me.”

After a silence, she went on :

“ You may think it will be different with you. You’re lovely. You’ll always attract men. But, if you think that,

man you're in love with is married. No good will come of it. It won't last. You'll find yourself alone. Then you'll discover loneliness. That's why I've come to-day. I want to save you from becoming like me."

"But who told you about me? How do you know what's happened?"

"He told me."

"Wade?"

"Yes."

"But I thought you never saw him?"

"I'll tell you something:—I'm happier than I've been for years. Do you know why? Because he comes to see me nowadays. He's worried about something—very worried. I don't know what it is, but he often comes in after dinner. Sits in an armchair and smokes a pipe. If you knew how different everything seems! All day I wonder if he'll come in the evening. I have coffee ready, in case he does come."

"You've no idea what he's worried about?"

"No, but it must be something serious, because he looks ill and says he can't sleep. But I don't ask, because I want him to keep on coming."

Then she added:

"He told me about you. He talks a lot about you. And a lot about Oliver, though he hasn't seen him for some time. I don't think he sees many people."

"That's odd, because he always wanted a crowd. He couldn't be alone for an hour."

"He's altered. When he told me that you'd left Oliver—left him for good, because you're in love with a foreigner—I had to come to see you. I had to warn you. You don't know what life can be like."

A few minutes later, she went.

Merle returned to the window. But, now, scarcely anything was to be seen and the only sound was that of the receding tide.

4

Scintillating sunshine had enticed people to go for a stroll on the Hove promenade but they soon discovered that, despite a diamond-sparkling sea and a fathomless sky, it was no day for sauntering. The sun lacked warmth and an

intermittent wind had a January emphasis, so the deluded either had to double their pace or return home.

Indoors, however, the day's deceptions were undetected. Sunshine danced in Merle's sitting-room, while the view from the window vaguely stirred Riviera memories, but she noticed neither the one nor the other, owing to curiosity about Marjorie Dawes—seated opposite at a small table, hurrying over after-luncheon coffee.

Everything about Marjorie's visit had a hint of mystery. She had telephoned a few hours ago to ask if she could come to Hove—she had stressed that it must be to-day—but, if she came, no one was to be told. This seemed odd to Merle—and so did Marjorie's manner on arrival.

Externally, she had not altered. She wore an expensive fur coat, the removal of which revealed a very smart suit, and she chattered trivialities with her usual vivacity, but, nevertheless, Merle detected an urgency behind this frivolous exterior, and one which Marjorie found increasingly difficult to conceal. For instance, it was now evident that she wanted Merle to finish her coffee, so that the floor waiter could clear away, leaving them free to talk without the impending threat of interruption.

When this had happened, Marjorie lit a cigarette, then asked:

"Where's that companion of yours?"

"Out. She always goes out when any one comes to see me."

"What's she like?"

"Nice. It can't be fun living with one cracked person after another."

Silence.

Marjorie continued to move restlessly to and fro, till Merle felt she was watching a magnificent animal prowling rebelliously up and down a cage.

At last Marjorie paused, put out her cigarette with a sudden decisive movement, then said:

"You're probably wondering why I haven't been here for weeks. I'll tell you why. I knew, if I came, I'd say everything—and I didn't know if I wanted to do that. Still, I've got to tell someone, and you're the only person I could tell. But, before I start, you're *certain* you've told no one I was coming to-day?"

"Certain. But what's it matter anyway?"

"It does matter. It matters a hell of a lot."

"I can't make you out, Marjorie. Any one would think you're scared."

"They'd be right. I am."

"You!"

"Yes—me."

She pulled a chair nearer to Merle's sofa, flung herself into it, then said:

"You won't understand a thing unless I start some way back. God, Merle! I'm trusting you as I never expected to trust any one. Trusting people is no habit of mine."

She looked round, then continued:

"When I met you and Oliver, I was Mrs. Ralph Dawes. That was pretty good going for me. As you'll see. So I didn't go in for reminiscences. My type aren't usually keen on flash-backs, but I'll have to show you some—or you won't get the lay-out."

She leaned further forward, then said:

"When I met Ralph, I was dance hostess in a night club. But don't get me wrong—it wasn't the kind of night club you and Oliver know. Not a bit that kind. It had several different names while I was with it—and it changed its address quite a lot. And I wasn't—hostess—only for dances. The management did all they could to give the staff experience. Well, one night, in came Ralph Dawes in officer's uniform. He seemed to like me more than a little, but plenty of men seemed to like me more than a little, so that didn't mean much to me. Then I discovered he was different."

"In what way?"

"Every way. He treated me on equal terms. He ignored my setting. He ignored everything he must have known about the life I led. Things he *must* have known, because he isn't a bit of a fool."

"That's true enough."

"He treated me as if I were one of his sister's friends. That was the first new sensation I'd had in years. I'd often heard travellers' tales about mysterious beings called gentlemen—and here was one. One night he asked me to marry him."

Marjorie lit another cigarette, then repeated:

"Asked me to marry him. Well, he certainly must have had an effect on me, because I was crazy enough to try to tell

him that he didn't have to marry my kind—but he stopped me dead. He said there were only two women who had ever meant a thing to him. I was one—and the other was Flora."

"Who was Flora?"

"A girl in the American bar at the Atalanta, but she'd disappeared. If she hadn't, I might not be Mrs. Dawes. You never know. Ralph was pretty stuck on her. Anyway, we married. My past was obliterated. One gent, who had known quite a bit about my life at that night club, thought he'd get some easy money as I'd gone up in the world, but, after a little talk with Ralph, he changed his mind. Changed it very quickly."

"I believe it."

"You believe it, Merle, because you're thinking of Ralph as he is now. But *this* is what you've got to get, and get it good and proper:—The Ralph Dawes I married wasn't in the least like the Ralph Dawes you know."

Merle tried to ask a question, but Marjorie exclaimed:

"Better listen. And for Christ's sake keep all this under your hat!"

After a pause, she went on:

"Here's Ralph's story. He joined the army as a private in 1914. He got a commission, became a major, won two decorations. But the whole point is that he was a fanatic about the war. Absolutely cracked about it! He really did believe it was the war to end war. He really did believe it would make the world safe for democracy. Yes, you can stare! But you know what stuff men manage to believe, once they start murdering each other. I tell you that the war was a crusade for Ralph. He even expected homes fit for heroes. He'd talk for hours about it. You never saw such faith."

Marjorie paused, then asked:

"Ever been to a revivalist meeting?"

"No. And I bet you haven't."

"That's where you're wrong. I went to one at the Albert Hall one night with a bunch of people. We were all lit-up, that's why we went. Well, that revivalist was pretty hot at his stuff, but Ralph had him beat. Ralph was terrific. He was certain that victory would mean a new world. He was crazy on Wilson—crazy on the Fourteen Points and all the rest of it. You see? I still remember the

lingo. He must have been inspired because, when I listened to him, I half-believed a new world was coming. Only when I was with him. Directly I was alone, and remembered one or two things, I soon became normal."

"I'd never have believed he was like that."

"Who would? But, believe it or not, the war was a crusade to him. Well, if you remember, victory did not bring a new world. And democracy went down the drain. So Ralph—adjusted his outlook. And he did it overnight. And he did it very thoroughly."

"You mean——"

"I mean he—adjusted himself. That's his phrase, not mine. He saw, at last, that life's a smash-and-grab raid—camouflaged with a little chat about Jesus Christ. That was not news to me—but it was hot news to him. So he got into the racket. All the qualities which had made him a good officer—initiative, courage, capacity for taking risks, a cool head, and so on—were pressed into the fascinating profession of living by one's wits. He wasted no time about it. He was married to a woman who had learned a good many things—and forgotten none of them. He dropped calling himself major. Only a few of the people we know nowadays have any idea that he was once in the army. He cut out everything he had been—and everything he had once believed. We had a few rows, which told us quite a lot about each other, then we got down to the job. And, one way and another, we didn't do badly. No need to go into details—but, one way and another, we didn't do badly."

"What about you? Did you like it?"

"It was—exciting. I was young. There were plenty of possibilities. You were always on your toes. You had to be. And he was clever! My God, was he clever! Detached! Audacious! I liked him a lot. That didn't stop me having affairs, of course, because I'm not a one-way street. I tried to deceive him, and went on trying, but it wasn't any good. He was always six moves ahead of me."

After a pause, she added:

"Well, roughly, that was the set-up. Then things changed and I began to get a bit frightened."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons. Things generally got tighter. Rich tourists stopped coming to Europe. People looked at their money a long time before they—put it back in their pockets."

I started to think. And that's one of the things you just must *not* do in my kind of life. I suddenly discovered that several years had slipped behind me without my noticing it. The future began to make faces at me when I woke in the night. I'd lost a lot of the illusions I used to have. Security looked more inviting than adventure."

"When did all this happen?"

"Oh not much more than a year ago. It's really the reason why I went to Milan with that man. Remember? I thought I'd leave Ralph—and cuddle down with Certainty."

She lit a cigarette from the end of the one she had finished.

"Anyhow, I came back from Milan, for all sorts of reasons."

She rose abruptly, then began to pace to and fro.

Over a minute passed before, she said:

"Not long ago, Merle, I began to be scared—really scared. Things were desperate, so Ralph did another adjustment. I don't know what it was, but he seems to have plenty of money, though I don't know where it comes from."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Because he'd tell me. And I kind of feel I don't want to know. But that isn't all. I know now I'll never get away from Ralph. Never! And I want to get away—want to like hell!"

After a silence, she said slowly:

"God knows what's happening to him! He's resigned from the club——"

"Resigned! But he was always there, playing cards!"

"He doesn't play cards any more. He says they bore him—since he went nap and won. I'm telling you everything, Merle. If he finds out, he'll do me in."

"Don't you believe it!"

"I know it. He's no limits."

Merle turned towards her impetuously.

"You really mean that?"

"You seem very interested."

"I am. Very interested."

"Then you can take it from me that Ralph has *no* limits."

"Good! I'm sick of people who've nothing else. First, Agatha comes and tells me to go back to Oliver because of the boys. Won't she *ever* see that we lost the boys long ago?"

Even she admitted they wanted to spend the Christmas holidays with the Montagues. Then Dollie Wade comes——”

“Dollie Wade! What on earth does she look like nowadays?”

“Like nothing on earth—literally. She’s a ghost. *She* tells me to go back to Oliver in order to dodge loneliness. Isn’t that rich? I agree with the man who said: ‘If you’re afraid of loneliness, don’t marry.’ Yes, in comes Dollie Wade to tell me how happy she is because her vast bore of a husband sometimes comes to see her nowadays. Incidentally, she admitted he only came because he’s worried to death.”

“She didn’t say what’s worrying him, did she?”

“She doesn’t know. And she daren’t ask, because it might frighten him away. She lives on stray bones which he throws her to gnaw. And she wants me to do the same. I’m sick of people who cower in a cage! Frightened people who live on scraps!”

Then Merle added:

“One day I might want someone who hasn’t any limits.”

“That’s Ralph, all right. But what gets me, Merle, is that there’s something in him which he never shows to any one—something he’s absolutely alone with. Men seem able to do that, but I swear no one’s ever done it like Ralph has. God only knows what goes on inside him! It’s something red-hot, although he seems as cold as an icicle.”

She made a gesture, indicating the impossibility of making herself clear, then said:

“It’s a pity your friend, Brent, hasn’t seen what I’ve seen happen to Ralph. He’d get a book, all right. I tell you, Ralph’s the exact opposite of everything he used to be.”

“I can understand that.”

“You can? Well, I can’t. It seems queer to me when flame turns to ice. Sometimes, when he looks at me with those odd eyes, I think I’ll scream. But one thing I do know—whatever it is he’s doing to get money, he’s doing it for me. I *know* that, because he said so. And he doesn’t lie.”

“And that frightens you?”

“Cut it out, Merle! You know me. I’m not worth much. He must know that too, but it doesn’t alter the fact that I’m the only person he cares about. Although he admires you.”

"I doubt it. Perhaps he will one day."

"I tell you he admires you! He says you're romantic, neurotic, but not a fool. That's high praise from Ralph. And he thinks you have courage."

"And he hates Oliver, doesn't he? And he hates Wade."

"You think that?"

"I've thought it a long time."

"You see plenty, don't you?"

"Being in love makes you see plenty."

Marjorie stopped by the window, then gazed at the sparkling sea. Neither spoke for some minutes, then Marjorie returned to her chair near the sofa.

"Listen, Merle! I don't suppose you'll take any notice, but I can't help that. The best thing you can do is to go back to Oliver. No! Wait! *Wait*. I know that sounds soft when you're burned-up by Yashvin. But I've a reason for telling you to go back, and a good one. You've had a tough time most of your life, but there's one thing you've always had."

"What's that?"

"Security. No! *Listen*. People who've always slept in a bed, don't value beds. Oliver's a bore, of course, but so are most rich business men. A woman can't get it both ways, and she's damned lucky if she gets it one. You're secure with Oliver. And you don't know what it's like not to be . . . Are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"Well, you didn't look like it. Now, about Yashvin. I'm asking no questions, but a good many months have passed, and you haven't gone to him. And, anyway, what do you know about his position? You don't think he's rich because he stayed at the Miramar, do you?"

"I don't care if he hasn't a shilling."

"You soon would. He has a wife, who's mental, and a child. Not too easy for him to pull out. And, if he did, he's got to keep them. It wouldn't look pretty, of course, if he walked out on a mental wife, but we'll skip that. Anyway, if I were you, I'd take Oliver—and security."

Merle shot to her feet with an alacrity which astonished Marjorie.

"You think I've a choice, don't you? You think I want life on any terms, don't you? Well, you're wrong. Oliver and I can't find a thing to say to each other—not a

thing, d'you hear ?—but you, and all the rest of them, want me to go back to him. To spend years and years and years with him ! Can't you see it would be hell for both of us ? *Security !* A man serving a life sentence has security. An eagle in a cage at the Zoo has security. By God, I'll go mad if I listen to any of you much longer ! But you don't have to worry. I'm settling all this. And settling it soon."

"How ?"

"I'm going to get Oliver to go to Verna, with Rod, to see Boris. And——"

"You're crazy ! He won't go."

"He'll go. He won't dare not to. He'll be afraid of what I might do, if he doesn't. When I get to a certain point, Marjorie, I haven't any limits."

"But what on earth do you think will happen if he does go ?"

"Something will come out. It will decide things. I know it."

"But why Brent ? Where does he come in ?"

"He'll get on with Boris. And he'll notice things Oliver won't. Anyhow, Oliver is coming here to-night and I'm going to arrange it."

Then Merle added :

"He wouldn't divorce me. I begged him to, but he wouldn't."

"What's that got to do with anything now ?"

"They've got to meet. I can't go on like this for another week."

Neither spoke for some moments, then Marjorie said suddenly :

"Can I tell Ralph that you're going to get Oliver to go to Verna ?"

"If you like. Why do you want to ?"

"So that I can say I've seen you. I came to-day because he's away, but I'd much rather tell him I've been. Much rather. If I tell him Oliver's going to Verna, he won't ask about anything else."

"You can tell him. Every one will know soon."

"That's grand, Merle ! I know you won't repeat a word I've said. And now we won't talk any more. We'll look at the sea for a bit—and then I'll have to go. Mind you telephone in the morning and tell me what happened."

CHAPTER VIII

ENCOUNTER

A WEEK later. . . .

All day it had snowed and, now night had come, flakes danced round lights in the West-End like confetti thrown at a celestial carnival. The city was transfigured : pavements, shop signs, electric standards, everything, had been raised in glory. Except for dark gashes cut by the traffic, London was spell-bound by a white magician.

People seemed priests of a secret brotherhood, intent on mysterious missions. Or they had a conspiratorial air :—hooded figures, moving cautiously ; some under bobbing umbrellas, like giant mushrooms ; some bent ; all soundless. Silence had invaded the City. To look round, was to be enraptured by the familiar in bridal array : to gaze upwards, was to be overwhelmed by the tumultuous descent of pirouetting flakes.

Electric signs—now blazoning inducements ; now collapsing into obscurity—were survivals of obliterated yesterday. Paper sellers, sheltering in doorways, shouting : "Stavisky Sensation !" certainly seemed grotesquely remote from this virgin world of lyrical lovely snow.

The brightly-lit Piccadilly Circus was a chaos of whirling flakes, through which pedestrians groped and ghostly buses moved like monsters in a dream. To stand in the Circus, even for a few moments, was to lose all semblance to a normal human being. Nevertheless, Brent stood on the kerb-stone outside the London Pavilion, as hypnotised by the fairy prospect as a child watching a transformation scene at a pantomime.

Eventually, however, discovering that he looked like a snow-man, he walked briskly down Shaftesbury Avenue and soon reached the Abercorn which was in a cul-de-sac off Wardour Street.

The Abercorn was an aged public house, now in process of alteration in order to meet modern demands. This alteration was a gradual one, which suggested that the old building resented the necessity for change, and had now reached a stage at which ancient and modern were equally represented.

The entrance belonged to the past, for, having pushed open a palsied door, and having thrust aside a heavy curtain, you found yourself in a somewhat dimly-lit room, mellow with memories and adorned with smoke-grimed sporting prints. Opposite the bar, was a single table in a recess, but this was rarely occupied owing to the fact that you had only to pass through a swing door to find a brilliantly-lit chromium-fitted snack counter. Naturally, customers who wanted to eat patronised this, while those who had time only for a quick drink stopped in the ancient bar.

There were two reasons why Brent liked the Abercorn. The first being that, if he wanted to be alone, privacy seemed certain as no one he knew had ever heard of the place ; and the second was the solitary table in the recess. Actually, he had come to regard this table as his personal property. There he would sit, have a drink, read—and, if he were interested in his book or too lazy to move, a waiter would bring excellent sandwiches from the snack counter, with the result that Brent could remain in splendid isolation till closing time.

When he entered on this particular evening, he stood for some minutes, blinking, to get the snow out of his eyes, then he heard someone call out :

“ Brent ! ”

Dawes was seated at the table in the recess.

“ Come and have a drink. You must need one, a night like this.”

Brent’s astonishment at seeing Dawes was followed by a premonition counselling caution in dealing with him, but curiosity soon over-ruled it.

When Brent was seated, Dawes said :

“ Glad I ran into you. Can’t really talk when we meet at Markham’s. What are you going to have ? ”

While he ordered drinks, Brent looked at him more closely. He had always been interested in the major, so he welcomed an opportunity for an intimate talk, especially as he had recently become more aware of an elusive quality in the enigmatic Dawes. More than once Brent had been impressed by the fact that each time one encountered Dawes, one noticed a different aspect of his appearance. On this occasion, for instance, he discovered that the light in the vigilant eyes seemed frozen.

When the waiter went, Dawes said :

"It's a hell of a night. You're not going to have too good a trip to Verna to-morrow."

"Don't talk about it! When Oliver telephoned and told me he had rung up Yashvin and arranged for us to go, it knocked me for a loop. Still, things couldn't go on indefinitely as they are and it will be interesting to find out what kind of a man Yashvin really is."

"Pity they weren't lovers. If they had been, Merle would probably have forgotten him by now. The fact that she's so in love tells one nothing, of course. It's perfectly possible to be in love with someone who's totally worthless."

Brent hesitated, then said :

"Well, for good or ill, we go to-morrow. Any guess as to the result?"

"On balance, I think Merle will return to Markham."

He spoke indifferently. A moment later, the waiter brought the drinks.

There was a silence during which Brent remembered that, months ago, he had thought Dawes would welcome a break between Markham and Merle, but, now, he decided he had been wrong. It was very evident that Dawes did not care tuppence if Merle went back to Markham.

"Are you in a hurry, Brent?"

"Not in the least. I shall eat here. I'm not going out into that snow again till I have to."

"Good. Several things I'd like to talk about. By the way, is there any news? I haven't seen a paper."

"Stavisky's shot himself—while the police were battering on the door. At least, that's one version. Another is that Stavisky was shot by the police, because he knew too much about prominent politicians—which is why they kept putting off arresting him. There are lots of versions. You can take your pick. Anyway, it's just another indication that the balloon will soon go up."

"You think so?"

"I'm certain. Japan out of the League—Germany out of the League—guerrilla civil war in Germany—shadow factories going up here—a reserve of air pilots being created—unemployment everywhere. The balloon's going up all right. The dominant fact, as I see it, is that a new element has entered human affairs."

"What's that?"

"Extremity has invaded life."

"That's an interesting theory."

"Extremity has invaded life on every level. Germany is, at the moment, the most dramatic example of extremity. Surely any one can see that modern Germany comes from despair—and bears all the marks of her origin."

"And why, do you imagine, has extremity suddenly emerged?"

Brent thrust his fingers through his hair—a certain sign that he was intensely excited mentally.

"Because no beliefs are held in common nowadays. All the old myths are exploded and no new one has been created. Only a shared illusion makes unity. We're all absolutely bewildered. Science has discovered too much, too quickly. Once we had only a world to deal with—now we've universes on our hands. Our position is very much like that of a chick—just after it's broken the shell. When it was *in* the shell, it probably had quite a comfortable adequate creed—which became utterly irrelevant directly the shell was broken. Roughly, we're in that position to-day. That's why it's comic for the church to go on preaching a dolls'-house conception of God."

"You're probably right, but how many people, do you suppose, think about such things?"

"Very few. But plenty feel them. It may be worse to feel things than to think them. We're all bewildered. We've stayed little—and our background has become enormous. But it is still true that men have to find a meaning to life. They must believe in a hierarchy in which humanity has place and purpose. The alternative is despair—with its brood of horrors. We know nothing, of course, of the ultimate nature of anything, but men must have an illusion about themselves—and that's hard to come by nowadays. We're dubious of fine phrases about mankind. On the evidence, there isn't much love in human nature. If any one disagrees with that statement, he'd better compare what a country will spend in peace with what a country will spend in war. Fear has a longer purse than love. The simple fact is that Napoleon is the idol of the Western world. Christ is only an ideal."

Although Dawes listened, he also noted every one who entered or left the bar, but Brent was too intent on his theme to notice this.

"Do you know, Dawes, that I once tried to explain to Oliver that illusion is the passport to paradise?"

"Did you get anywhere?"

"Not a long way. He wanted the theory exemplified in terms of persons. Merle was an obvious instance, of course. But Oliver wanted to know what illusions he had had. And Wade. And you."

"Really?"

"Yes. I said I didn't know, but was willing to bet that you had once been very different from what you are to-day."

"Pretty safe guess. What interests me about your insistence on the necessity for illusion is—why are you so interested? And that gets me to this:—I read your last book not so long ago."

"Don't talk about that thing!"

"It's not up to form—not by a long way. Still, I suppose a writer, like a boxer, has to go into a clinch sometimes. Anyway, it seems to me that you're so keen on illusion because you've lost yours."

"You think a man's beliefs are just mental projections of his emotional state?"

"Nearly always. Take that book you wrote some years ago, *The Man Who Lost Everything*. You didn't care tuppence about illusion then. You were certain you'd seen something. You'd had a kind of vision, which was real to you. Incidentally, there's something I want to ask you about that book. Something that seemed incongruous. Wait a minute. I must get it clear."

Brent was leaning across the table, eyes intent on Dawes. The book mentioned had always meant much to him and, in his present state, he clung to the knowledge that he had written it.

Dawes put his objection, which was a penetrating one, and Brent instantly and excitedly defended his treatment with a barrage of facts derived from his unique knowledge of the book. He forgot time, place, audience. Lack of mental and emotional control was Brent's vice—and most vices have deep roots when a man has reached forty. He talked at lightning speed, gesticulated, burned up energy as if its source were inexhaustible.

Although Dawes followed the argument, he unobtrusively ordered more drinks, with sandwiches to follow, and

continued to note those who left the bar and snow-mantled newcomers.

Finally, when Brent was aflame with excitement, Dawes said casually :

" You've convinced me. I'm also convinced that before long you're going to write another remarkable book."

" You—are ? "

" Quite sure of it. Your association with Markham is a rich experience. I don't mean you'll just record it—you're not the reporter type of writer. You'll get something individual out of it."

This notable change of subject did not quench Brent's excitement.

" It's odd you should say that. Damned odd ! A lot of things have come into my head lately about Markham and Wade."

" That's interesting."

Brent thrust his fingers through his hair, then raced on :

" A lot of things. In the first place, look at Wade and Markham. They're success stories—the only type which interests people nowadays. They started from scratch, and all the rest of it. They've money, position, power. Well, what I want to know is this :—Are the young to accept them as ideals ? Is the imagination of youth to be kindled by the hope of becoming like Markham and Wade. What do you think ? "

" It's what you think that interests me."

" If youth regard Mr. Oliver Markham and Mr. John Wade as consummations devoutly to be wished, England won't be a first-class power much longer. Still, I take it, their kind will disappear."

" What makes you think that ? "

" Modern business is really a branch of applied science, so, before long, it will be run by technicians and trained administrators. Business men of the Markham and Wade type will soon be as out-of-date as blunderbusses."

" Have you explained that to Markham ? "

" Not yet. I'm saving it for a conversationally rainy day. But I've made a discovery about him."

" Really ? "

" It's this. Outside his own game, he's damned near a fool."

" You think that ? "

"I'm certain of it. God! if any one had told me a few months ago that he'd have been helpless in this Merle crisis, I wouldn't have believed it. Why, ever since I told him what I believed to be the only policy with Merle, he's followed me like a dog. Except once."

"You mean—when he consulted Spencer Oliphant?"

"So you heard about that?"

"Wade told me. I've been seeing quite a bit of Wade lately. But you were going to tell me the line you took about Merle right from the beginning."

"Directly I saw that Oliver wouldn't break with her, I told him there was only one policy—to make *Yashvin* convince Merle that he had no proposition to make."

"Pretty shrewd, as far as it goes."

"I'm glad you think so. I was certain it was the only policy, but, of course, it needed time and patience. And one has to remember that *Yashvin* is an unknown quantity."

The sandwiches arrived and Dawes insisted on Brent taking some interest in them.

"Worst of people like you is that they burn themselves up. It's a matter of temperament, of course. Still, you must eat. Try some of these. And I'll get you another drink."

When the drinks had arrived, Dawes went on:

"This Verna trip is going to be interesting for you."

"Very. I've taken care not to get a preconceived notion of *Yashvin*. So I haven't a pattern into which to force facts."

"Much better that way. You're rather like a detective with a theory, who is about to discover whether it fits the actual situation."

"That's it. It's simple enough in one way. If *Yashvin* has a proposition, Merle will go to him. If he *hasn't*, he must be forced to admit it—to Merle."

"And then?"

"She'll go back to Oliver."

"And then?"

"God only knows!"

"So you've no idea?"

"None."

After a pause, Brent added:

"You can say what you like, but Oliver is a mysterious being."

"I expect you're right. He probably talks more freely to you than he does to me."

"I've put him under a microscope. I'd have died of boredom if I hadn't, though it's also true that I can't help liking him. But there's one thing about him which absolutely beats me."

"What's that?"

"He's certain everything will be all right if Merle goes back to him. God only knows why, because they've nothing to say to each other! It isn't just sex, though that counts a lot. He's completely dependent on her."

"Yes, it is odd. Anyhow, it's a good thing you're going to Verna with him. You'll need all your subtlety to deal with him and Yashvin. Still, that's only part of your job."

"What's the other part?"

"I understood you were going to force Yashvin into the open. Make him admit that he has no proposition. And you've got to do that with Markham present. Won't be easy, will it?"

"Sounds impossible, but that's the programme. Merle's no idea of all this, of course."

"Naturally."

Brent outlined various aspects of the Verna trip at length. As he developed numerous possibilities, he dimly recognised that Dawes's reactions were never emotional. He remained imperturbable, intelligent, aloof. It was impossible to kindle a spark in him. You might as well try to strike a match on snow. Nevertheless, Brent found the nonchalant Dawes attractive and wanted, therefore, to switch the conversation to a more intimate level.

"Something you said earlier, Dawes, interested me very much."

"I wonder what that could have been."

"You said it's perfectly possible to love someone who is totally worthless."

"Surely that's pretty obvious."

"You think Yashvin may be totally worthless?"

"No evidence, either way. The infatuated Merle can't be regarded as evidence."

"But your wife met him."

"Scarcely. Yashvin and Merle were always alone together. And, if you remember, Marjorie left them to go to Milan."

"Well, there it is, but tell me this:—What do you really think about Merle?"

"I admire her. Courage is courage—even when it comes from ignorance. And I'm sorry for her. I don't say that patronisingly."

"Why—exactly—are you sorry for her?"

Dawes gave an abrupt laugh.

"That gets us back to your illusion theory, Brent. Some people must have an element of make-believe in their lives. Merle is one of them. She proved that, somewhat melodramatically, years ago. I remember reading somewhere that if you take make-believe away from the average person, you take away his happiness."

"That's certain."

"Well, if it's true, then it's better to have illusions when you're young. Illusions are like measles. You should have them in youth, when their effect is not serious. All the same, I imagine that if you're young and ardent—and then discover that your illusions *are* illusions—you may have a bad time. But you get romanticism out of your system. Once—and for ever."

Then Dawes added:

"How old is Merle? About thirty-eight? She's going to be hurt—quite a lot. She's like her father. She asks an enormous amount from life. And she's going to get—Markham."

"What happens then?"

"It's any one's guess. She won't even have memories."

"Why not?"

"My dear Brent, if you succeed in proving that Yashvin has no proposition to make—and never had one—Merle won't have any memories. She'll discover that she dreamed a dream."

"But you agree that the only thing to do is to force Yashvin into the open?"

"Even if it's the only thing to do, it will hurt. Sometimes the only thing to do is to have an operation without an anæsthetic—but it hurts."

After a silence, Brent said:

"I suppose you haven't been to Hove because you don't want to tell Merle the situation as you see it?"

"That's one reason. I'll probably meet Merle often enough before long."

Dawes looked round the bar, then added :

"We'll have to go. It's getting on for closing time. Pity! It's been interesting."

They rose, then, just as Dawes was going to get his overcoat, Brent asked :

"Suppose Merle asked you for advice, what would it be?"

"Something she wouldn't be able to do."

"And what's that?"

"I should tell her to come to terms with life."

"Would you advise me to do the same?"

"Certainly not. I want you to go on writing."

When they were ready to leave, Dawes asked :

"Which way are you going?"

"Piccadilly Circus. I'll get the tube from there."

"Right! I'll walk to the Circus with you."

The snowstorm was less intense but flakes still eddied down. The moon had risen, revealing a magic city.

When they reached the Circus, Dawes said :

"Good-night. And good luck on the trip."

"Thanks. Good-night."

Brent stood for some moments after Dawes's departure, staring in front of him, but wholly unconcerned with surroundings. Then, suddenly, he experienced the sensations of a man who discovers that his wallet has been stolen. He wanted to take instant action and, at the same time, was acutely aware of impotence to act. He looked first one way, then another: took a few steps, came to a standstill. He had been tricked—he was certain of it. But, unlike a man robbed of his wallet, Brent did not know the nature of his loss. He felt powerless—and he also felt utterly exhausted.

Then he remembered that, one evening, about a week ago, he had run into Marjorie in Shaftesbury Avenue and had told her he was on his way to the Abercorn. He had forgotten the incident almost immediately, but he now wondered whether Dawes's appearance at the Abercorn was related to it. And yet why should Dawes want to see him? And what, precisely, had he learned from their talk to-night?

Brent stamped with irritation.

It was useless to think. He'd better go home and get to bed. This Verna trip presented problems enough without bothering about Dawes.

Part III—Yashvin

CHAPTER I

DEPARTURE

THE boat train steamed out of Victoria station into a blank bleak world. An inhospitable sky stared at a snow-bound earth. Now and again a fugitive flake fluttered down, but this only emphasised the immobility of the white landscape.

Markham and Brent, seated opposite each other in corner seats of a first-class smoking compartment, watched the ever-vanishing ever-renewed winter scene, each intent on very different thoughts.

To Markham, this trip to Verna was the culminating fantasy in a series which had begun at the Capri and had become progressively grotesque. Since Dawes had revealed his knowledge about Flora, and had used that knowledge for a subtle form of blackmail, Markham had become a spectator: he watched circumstances in which he was intimately concerned as if they were those of an intricate dream. He could not believe that they had happened to him, and he dared not believe that they would be permanent. Consequently it had long been essential to have an objective which, once reached, would instantly restore normality. When things are desperate enough, every one confidently expects a miracle—and, against all the evidence, Markham convinced himself that Merle's return would exorcise the many spectres now haunting him.

This conviction had made him consent to go to Verna. Merle should not be able to say that he had refused any request, however abnormal, or however humiliating its execution might be for him. So, now, he was in a train en route for Verna. Perhaps this would prove the last ordeal before her return brought deliverance: perhaps, in retrospect, this journey would seem the final phase of a nightmare.

Meanwhile Brent, having glanced repeatedly at his companion, tried to decide whether the physical change in Markham, or the emotional, was the more remarkable.

Physically, Markham had deteriorated rapidly during the last few months. The bags under the melancholy eyes were

more pronounced ; the nose had sharpened ; the mouth contracted. The long bony figure seemed inert and there was a nerveless quality in the broad capable hands. On balance, however, Brent found the emotional change more extraordinary. The contrast between the Markham of a few months ago and the one seated opposite had dramatic emphasis, for, one by one, every fiery quality in the former Markham had been quenched. The Markham who had raged at the Capri, the maddened Markham who had gone to Brent's flat last May, would have violently rejected the possibility that he would meet Yashvin in any conceivable circumstances. But here he was on the way to Verna. He had been reduced to complaisant passivity. In some way, difficult for Brent to imagine, this man had had no defence against disaster—and the fact that he was alone in failure suggested that he had been alone in success.

Folkestone Harbour was not exhilarating. A sullen sky, heavy with snow, loomed above a heaving waste of sea. Everything proclaimed a state of siege against icy wind : everywhere—white monotony : the stark afternoon was failing. Pedestrians had a persecuted air. Even the flights of gulls lacked rapture and seemed routine patrols.

Eventually, the last trunk was stowed and the boat made her way towards the open sea.

"Come on," Markham exclaimed. "It's going to roll like hell. There's only one thing to do."

When they had imbibed their first brandy and dry ginger ale, the boat had apparently decided not to proceed to Boulogne but to travel sideways towards an unknown destination, for she indulged in a series of switchback movements with unhappy effects on a number of passengers.

"Better have another of these," Markham announced. "Only thing to do."

When the second brandy and dry ginger had joined the first, they went for a somewhat hazardous expedition to the deck. Both had brought caps for the crossing and with these well pulled down they groped along in heavy overcoats, holding on to anything that offered support. The wind was a flail of ice ; the boat quivered like a living thing in mortal danger ; the long undulating rollers had venomous white crests ; a solitary seagull followed astern.

"Had enough of this !" Markham shouted in Brent's ear.

The third brandy and dry ginger was followed by a fourth

—after which Markham said that he was ready for another expedition to the deck.

On this occasion, Brent was unaware of the enmity of the elements. A remarkable firework display seemed in progress at the centre of his being, illuminating a vast inner universe, which claimed him so completely that he was aware of his body only to a very limited extent. Appearance was no longer reality: icy wind and raging sea had become allies; the seagull astern was a guardian spirit at which he gazed affectionately, while a rapturous inner glow extended its dominion endlessly in every direction. Then he glanced at Markham with admiration. Four stiff brandies—and no effect. It was a remarkable achievement. Negative, but remarkable.

Again, Markham shouted in his ear:

“Had enough of this!”

But Brent decided not to move. He had a good grip on a rail—he was at one with the universe—and a still small voice was just able to whisper that, to-morrow, he would have to deal with Yashvin. He indicated that he would stay where he was, so Markham left him and returned to the bar.

When the latter returned, half an hour later, the wind had sobered Brent—and the outline of Boulogne was dimly discernible.

Soon, the deck was over-run by vociferous French porters. Although Brent frequently went abroad, he was again impressed by the fact that the English Channel separates not different countries but different worlds. This distinction was stressed on the present occasion owing to a change in Markham's manner which became extremely evident directly he found himself in the fair land of France.

His every attitude expressed weary contempt for his surroundings. He sighed frequently, closed his eyes when an official or a porter spoke to him, and generally indicated that he was suffering the pangs of a superior being, surrounded by lesser breeds without the law.

Brent, who found it an inspiring experience to leave the rough island home occasionally, regarded this change as an ominous augury for the success of their mission.

They dined on the Basle train but although Markham ordered a bottle of the most expensive wine, his air of patient martyrdom became more apparent. As to speech, he had a formula which he used consistently, no matter how

inappropriate it might be. If a waiter, or the ticket inspector, or the *wagon-lit* attendant made a comment on any subject, Markham invariably replied, in an accent on which you could have struck a match : *Comme vous voudrez*. The effect on the exuberant *wagon-lit* attendant, who had indicated their berths with a flourish, was desolating—till he consoled himself with the reflection that *milord* would make suitable amends with a stupendous tip.

When Brent was alone, lying in his berth, smoking a final cigarette, he recognised to the full the nature of the enterprise to which he had committed himself. In a few hours, he would be confronted by the unknown but very experienced Yashvin. That would have made considerable demands if he had had no one else to consider. To arrive with Markham, in his present mood, seemed a desperate undertaking.

"Damn it ! I *must* sleep !"

But he could not sleep. To divert his thoughts, he got up, pulled a blind aside, then looked out. It had started to snow before they left Boulogne and it was still snowing. He returned to his berth, determined to sleep, but he remained awake and was still awake when the train reached Basle at about six in the morning.

They had an hour's wait before catching the Verna train and just as Brent was thinking how welcome breakfast would be, an irate Markham appeared.

"Don't talk to me about these damned dagos ! Hope to God I never see another of 'em after this infernal trip !"

"What's happened now ?"

"That cursed *wagon-lit* feller ! I gave him a five bob tip for the two of us. And what's he do ? Produces a chart which shows that the smallest tip each person can give him is three and ninepence !"

"You don't mean that ?"

"I do mean it. Well, come on. Hope to God we don't get poisoned at breakfast."

The justly celebrated railway restaurant at Basle failed to impress Markham. The gorgeous food, the smoking hot coffee, the unrivalled jam, the mural decorations, left him unmoved. He looked round with a nostalgic expression, as if yearning for the rapturous railway refreshment rooms of old England. He made no comment till the bill was presented, when he announced that it was "damned dear."

The Verna train appeared and a few minutes later puffed out into a white world, now being slowly revealed by a lugubrious dawn.

They had a compartment to themselves. The train, which had evidently decided that there was no particular hurry, jogged along in a manner indicating a readiness to stop if anything of interest emerged. Snow fell persistently. Big heavy flakes, falling in perpendicular lines.

Brent glanced at his companion, huddled in the corner opposite, and for the twentieth time tried to decide whether or not to hazard an attempt to make Markham see the Château Miramar situation as it might present itself to Yashvin. Often, during the last few months, Brent had wondered if it would be possible to induce Markham to discuss Yashvin with some detachment, but, on each occasion, had decided in the negative. Now, however, things were different. In a few hours they would be faced by the man whom Merle regarded as God. It seemed desirable, therefore, to suggest that Yashvin might have a case and one which it would be difficult to dismiss.

Brent lit a cigarette, then, just as he was about to invite Markham to become imaginative, the latter asked abruptly :

"D'you suppose that blackguard will meet us at the station?"

"No idea."

It was hopeless. Things would have to go their own way.

Lucerne. Two hours later, Lugano. Then, the frontier town of Chiasso.

Soon after the train stopped, the compartment was invaded by customs' officials, wearing uniforms somewhat reminiscent of those in a comic opera. They ransacked cases. They asked questions—to all of which Markham replied: *Comme vous voudrez*.

He sat with closed eyes. When, finally, a demand was made which included duty on half-empty cigarette boxes, Markham held out a handful of Italian money and let them take what they liked. This idol-like indifference checked volubility. The officials regarded one another in silent incredulity; then, weighed down with bandit gains, vanished.

A few minutes later, the train ran into Verna.

On the snow-covered platform was a solitary figure—a powerfully-built man, wearing a big soft black hat.

CHAPTER II

REVELATIONS

I

"AH! You are here! The weather—it is not weather. It is an arrangement to make you ill. A good journey?" A swift handshake with Markham, accompanied by a glance which swept him from top to toe. "Verna, in January, is not Verna. No!" A handshake with Brent, accompanied by an equally comprehensive glance. "Listen! I tell you something."

He took Markham's arm with one hand and Brent's with the other.

"The hotels—the good hotels—they are shut. Spring will open them. I have rooms for you at an hotel. It is not good. It is not bad. Come! We go. A taxi, he is waiting."

As they walked along the platform, followed by a couple of porters with the luggage, Brent experienced such a rush of impressions that some moments elapsed before three became prominent.

The first was the discouraging discovery that Yashvin presented a bigger problem than Brent's most pessimistic imaginings had visualised. Physically, he was impressive. Although barely middle height, he had the torso of a colossus; a massive head, with jet-black hair which accentuated the extraordinary whiteness of the skin; and a broad forehead meshed with delicate lines. Probably the most revealing features were the penetrating grey eyes and the sensuous lips.

Brent's second impression was a recognition of the fact that Yashvin had instantly obtained psychological ascendancy, not by a trick of technique, but as a result of inherent qualities. Yashvin was certain of himself—even his walk proclaimed it—consequently he had no vestige of self-consciousness. His confidence was innate. Experience had confirmed it, not created it.

Brent's third impression, which soon relegated all others to the background, was that Markham would be incapable

of making any contact with Yashvin. Already, his expression suggested utter bewilderment.

Meanwhile Yashvin continued to talk in a rich resonant tone, punctuated with generous gestures.

"In January, every one in Verna, here because he have to be. But I—I do not mind. I am strong."

He gave himself a blow on the chest which amply justified this assertion.

"Strong! I have generations of peasants behind me. Russian peasants. Italian peasants."

As they approached the taxi, he stopped to talk French to a business associate. A moment later, he spoke in German to a thick-set man. When he rejoined Markham and Brent he said:

"Forgive me. I am as well known here as a red dog."

The hotel, which was situated in a narrow street, rising sharply from the Square, had an ancient forlorn aspect and was patronised by persons concerning whom one could only guess, although there were two or three unmistakable commercial travellers.

An aroma of musty time pervaded rooms and narrow corridors, but the hotel's chief characteristic was that everything creaked—especially the staircase, which emitted ominous warnings as Markham and Brent ascended it. Chairs, tables, wardrobes seemed epitaphs to their own unhappy experience, while the beds had an enigmatic expression which hinted that their quality could be discovered only by attempting to sleep in them.

None of this worried Brent. Directly he was alone, he went to the window and looked out. There was the Square, three sides of which consisted of houses or shops with flat roofs, white or pink walls, and shuttered windows—the fourth being formed by the quay. Narrow streets ran up from the Square. A conical hill, surmounted by a lofty tower, dominated the town. The leaden waters of the lake disappeared between high hills towards the north: miniature mountains were dimly discernible in the frost-grey distance.

As Brent regarded this scene of "beauty o'er snowed and bareness everywhere," he contrasted it with the super guide-book description given by Merle of Verna in May—and decided that this wintry setting was more appropriate to a fact-finding expedition.

But at this point he was interrupted by the somewhat tumultuous entry of Markham.

"Good God! Is that what she wants? That feller! In love with *him*?"

"Apparently."

"Damn it! It's impossible! Look at him—listen to him! If he's what Merle wants, all I can say is you can be married to a woman for twelve years and know nothing whatever about her."

"You're not the first man to discover that. And you won't be the last."

They went down the protesting stairs, then entered the dining-room, where their appearance created notable interest among various members of nondescript humanity.

Yashvin awaited them at a corner table and during the meal—which consisted of everything Markham disliked, served in a setting representing everything he loathed—Brent's admiration for Yashvin widened.

It is not easy to be conversationally effective at luncheon with two men who are complete strangers, one of whom is the husband of a woman madly in love with you, especially if the said husband remains sepulchrally silent. Yashvin not only was effective but, by a triumph of personality, created almost a festive atmosphere which hypnotised Brent into believing that nothing could be more enjoyable than lunching at a third-rate Verna hotel in the rigours of winter. This achievement made Brent realise why Yashvin was so attractive to women.

Markham, too, seemed hypnotised, but for a very different reason. Directly the soup was served, he noticed that Yashvin's wrists were covered with thick black hair and, during the whole of the meal, he stared at those hairy wrists.

When luncheon was over, Yashvin announced that they would go to a room which was used for business conferences, then led them to an apartment on the third floor. It was more or less hexagonal in shape, contained a considerable amount of highly varnished furniture, and had an extraordinary number of doors. There must have been five or six, and one or other of them kept opening to admit a head which, after a voluble apology, was quickly withdrawn.

Yashvin's manner assumed, however, that everything was excellently adapted for an intimate conversation of a

delicate nature. He swept them into chairs at a large table, seated himself at the head of it, lit a Russian cigarette, then said :

"Now tell me please why you have come."

"Why!"

"Yes."

"My wife thinks she's in love with you. That's reason enough, isn't it?"

"She think that for months, but you come only now. Why?"

Markham hit the table with his fist.

"I'm the one to ask questions, not you. My wife comes to Verna last May. She is perfectly happy and——"

"Ah! Perfectly happy! She in love with you?"

"I say she was perfectly happy. You've broken up my marriage."

"Please! I do not understand. Your wife is happy. She come here without you. In a day—in one day—she fall in love with another man. I, Boris Yashvin, do not understand. Your wife fall in love easily. Yes?"

"Nothing of the kind!"

"*Bon!* You have come because she ask you?"

"Yes. It's no pleasure for me, I can assure you."

"I understand. For many months I think: He will come; he will write. But, no, nothing. Listen! I tell you something. I explain something."

Yashvin put out his cigarette, then pulled his chair nearer the table with a vigorous movement.

"Now, imagine this. It is Verna—last May—the Château Miramar—before dinner. I am in the lounge. I drink a cocktail. I look up. Two ladies come down the big staircase. One is blonde—in black—charming. She have perfect figure and remarkable eyes. But—remarkable! To the man in the bureau, I say: 'Who is the lady in black?' He reply: 'Mrs. Markham of London.' I ask: 'And her friend:?' He say: 'Mrs. Dawes, also from London.' I say: 'They are alone?' He say: 'Alone.' To myself I say: 'Ah!' And now, my friend, do you understand?"

Markham did not understand. He stared at Yashvin as if he were a criminal lunatic.

"You do not see? Listen! It is the Château Miramar. Not a boarding school for young ladies. It is the Château Miramar—and Mrs. Markham is alone. So of course I think

that Mr. Markham he go also to a Château Miramar. Naturally! Or he would be with his wife. Plenty modern women come alone to the Miramar. She is one of them. So I think. What would you think? Tell me?"

Silence.

"I like her. We dance together. We walk in the gardens. She like the things I like. She is happy. She is the same with every one. She is—how do you say?—all one piece. She look younger—more beautiful. She laugh. She talk to every one. Every one adore her. I like her. She like me. That is all."

"It's not all! She wants to leave me and her children to live with you."

"No, no! That is later! I speak of Verna—last May. The day come for her to go. She go. It is over. So I think. But no! It is not over! She write from Paris. She have told you! She will come to me! I am amazed. I do not know what to do."

"Never occurred to you to write to me."

"No. And you do not write either."

Markham delivered a long and half-incoherent catalogue of his wrongs. Long before he finished, Brent's hopes had sunk to zero. Markham was being ridiculous before a redoubtable opponent.

When at last he stopped, there was a long silence, which Markham ended by saying that he was going to his room to get a pipe.

Directly he had gone, Yashvin glanced swiftly at Brent, then said:

"You are an artist. Yes?"

"I'm a writer. My name's Roderick Brent."

"Aha! Directly I see you, to myself I say: 'This man he have come for business.' So you are Brent. She tell me much of you. This Markham—on the telephone—he say he bring a man with him. The name I do not hear. At the station, he do not introduce me."

"You didn't give him much chance."

"Aha! I talk a lot, hein? It is true. It is because I love life. I love him—with my blood."

"Tell me this, before he comes back. Is Oliver what you expected?"

"No! Worse. Much much worse! Ah, that poor *dar-ling*! To sleep with Olivairre! The bony Olivairre!"

Pause.

"I see him—and I understand. I understand everything. He is not a man, He is a dying brain in a dead body."

Another pause.

"The children—surely they are not his? It cannot be. No matter! I tell you something else. Before you go, I tell you many things. Yes, many. I like you. I trust you. I tell you this now: Olivairre do not exist for her. You know that? *Bon!* Later, I tell you more."

"If you get the chance."

"I make the chance. I, Boris Yashvin, do what I want. Always!"

Markham returned and continued the list of his grievances, but he was so repetitive that comment became superfluous. He went on and on. The only diversion was the continual opening of one or other of the many doors to admit a foreign countenance which instantly withdrew.

Eventually, Yashvin turned to Markham and exclaimed: "Come! We go now. We have a drink. We look round. Later, we talk. I arrange everything."

They got overcoats, then went to a café. After a drink, they walked through crisp piled snow to the cathedral. Yashvin, who evidently knew something about architecture, explained that it was a blend of Gothic, Lombard, and Renaissance styles—but Markham did not care tuppence about that. Yashvin then pointed out statues of the elder and the younger Pliny, flanking the central door of the façade—but Markham did not care tuppence about them. Yashvin indicated the beauty of a rose window above the western entrance—but Markham did not care tuppence about that either.

They dined at a small restaurant near the Square. Markham said nothing from soup to coffee and Brent listened to Yashvin's account of the silk industry at Verna.

"Listen, Mr. Markham! I say—always—what I think. And I do—always—what I want. So, now, I suggest something. You will think it extraordinary. No matter! It is this. You go to the hotel—and I talk to Brent. Yes?"

"You can do what you like. I don't care."

"Ah! We walk to the hotel. It will be better so. Much better. Come!"

Directly they had left Markham, Yashvin gave a tremendous sigh.

"That Olivairre! If he shoot me at the station—shoot me dead—I would have admired him. But to bore me—to bore me till my pulse stop!"

Then, taking Brent's arm:

"We go to another café. We talk. We drink. We forget Olivairre."

2

Before they had gone many yards, Yashvin stopped and said:

"We walk before we drink at the café? We get air? Yes?"

It was a full-starred sky. They plodded through untrodden snow till they reached the quay, then walked by the mysterious murmuring waters of the lake. Widely separated lights indicated the height of the hills opposite; the air was edged with frost; a few flakes were falling.

Suddenly Yashvin stopped:

"I like you. I look once at a person—and I know. I trust you."

He took each of Brent's arms in a powerful grip, then rocked him from side to side.

"You are Olivairre's friend? No?"

Pause.

"You are an Englishman? No!"

Another pause.

"You are an artist? Yes! I like you. I trust you. I tell you something. Listen!"

Then, with great deliberation:

"I have slept with her."

Long before Brent had assimilated this information, Yashvin added with reverberating emphasis:

"Once!"

Almost immediately, he went on:

"We go to the café. We talk. I tell you everything."

Feeling that he had stepped broad awake into the intricacies of a dream, Brent walked on till they reached a café in a back street. While Yashvin exchanged greetings with the proprietor, Brent looked round a low-pitched room, the misty atmosphere of which was ripe with conflicting aromas. The café was roughly divided into two, the smaller

and less desirable part being reserved for the ladies of the town, but Brent's bewilderment was too great to allow a detailed survey of surroundings, especially as Yashvin, on his return, swept him to a corner table and instantly obliterated everything but himself.

"If you knew how I wait for this! Just for this! For months I wait. To tell all to someone who knows Merle and Olivairre—some one intelligent! Now, I tell you everything. And, first, I tell you about myself."

He lit a cigarette with a flourish, then went on:

"I am not a child. I am forty and, unlike Olivairre, I am not a fool. I travel much—all my life I travel much. I have a business here. I have a wife and a son at Berne. My wife, from the day the boy is born, is ill." He touched his forehead significantly. "My son—but, wait!" He took out a pocket-book, extracted a photograph of an attractive boy and said: "You see? He is fine. Yes? So! I have a wife—and I have not a wife. What happen to me break some men. Nothing break me."

He rubbed his hands vigorously, moved nearer the table, then continued:

"There are two classes, my friend—two only. The weak and the strong. Always it is so. Always it will be so. Inequality is the law. Everywhere in nature is inequality. One tree get light—another none. One woman is beautiful. Many, so ugly, one shut the eye. The weak console themselves with principles. The weak invent justice, equality, and I know not what. The strong—live. One does not say such things to women. With women, one is half of oneself. It is why one likes to be with them. It is a holiday from facts. But to let a woman play the fool with one's life! Bah! One is not Olivairre!"

He called for more drinks, then went on:

"I tell you about her. All the days we spend together. One night, we become lovers. It happen. She is very shy. It is charming. Soon, the day come near for her to go. The night before, she cry. All night, she cry. She tell me that once she try to kill herself by jumping from a window. Not one word do I believe. These women see so many films they think all sorts of things happen to them which happen only on the screen. Then she talk about love. Luxury women, who come to luxury hotels without their husbands and take a lover, they often talk much of love.

One listens. Then the day arrive for them to go. A big car come to take them to the station. You give a charming bouquet—you say: 'Good-bye, dar-ling'—and that is the end. You know how it is."

Brent did not know. His experience of "luxury" women in luxury hotels was nil, but, in order to save time, he said he knew how it was.

"Bon! She go. To myself, I say: 'It is over.' She meet her husband in Paris. Soon, she forget Verna. Sometime, it may be, she wake in the night, remember Boris Yashvin, give a little shiver—half-desire, half-fear—then she remember her security, and cuddle closer to the bony Olivairre."

He made an expansive gesture.

"But—no! Letters come from Paris. She have told her husband! She will leave him—the children—everything! I stagger. She is not, then, another bored wife of a rich man. I become curious. Curiosity last longer than desire. I remember what she say about suicide and, for the first time, I think perhaps it happen. That Mrs. Dawes, she say it happen, but that I ignore. Now—I wonder. To tell her husband—to want to throw everything away—is not that a kind of suicide? I decide to—how do you say?—to play for the time."

Then, with a shrug of the shoulders:

"Still, hardly I believe it. I have known too many rich idle wives. She write and say she do not mind poverty. To myself I think: 'Soon, you mind much, dar-ling.' I have had poverty. Not English poverty. *Poverty!* I still play for the time. I write to her. I flatter her. I write that, soon, I come to London. From her husband, no word. I ask myself: 'Is he the silent strong man—or is he a fool?' To-day, I know."

"You went to London, then," Brent managed to say.

"I went to London. And the first thing that I do is to find out about her suicide story. I know the name of the flats in Highgate. I talk to an old porter. It is true."

He called for cigarettes, lit one, then continued:

"I meet her often. I make one huge discovery. She is a child. A child! I cannot believe it. That we were lovers one night, mean nothing to her. She love me as a child love. Never—never—have I known it. Only with an English woman would it be possible."

"You think that?"

"I know it! All the English are adolescent. It is the reason why they do not know what they do next—and why no one else know what they do next. Also, there is this:—Not only is England an island, but every one in it is an island."

"I've heard that, but I don't know whether I believe it."

"It is true, my friend. Every one in England is an island. Some are islands surrounded wholly by stupidity. Some surrounded wholly by knowledge. Others by snobbery. Many, by self-consciousness. The poor people are surrounded by kindness. But they are all islands. Every one."

"What about Oliver?"

"Olivairre is an island wholly surrounded by—Olivairre."

Then he went on:

"She is a child! She love like a child; she laugh like a child, she happy like a child. And, also like a child, she think she have only to want a thing badly enough to get it. She live a fairy story. Olivairre will divorce her—my wife divorce me—she leave her children—I leave my son. We are happy for ever and ever."

"What did you say?"

"I say: 'Perhaps. Later on. We will see.' It is enough for her. She decide it will happen in the autumn. Why, I do not know. Facts do not fall with the leaves. We go to Hampton Court, Kew Gardens, Richmond Park—I know not where. We lunch together. We dine together. Never—never—have I seen such happiness."

"But you knew it couldn't last."

"Every night, to myself I say: 'I am in the jam.' Then I think—children tire of toys. Maybe she will tire. But she do not tire. I tell you that I, Boris Yashvin, do not know what to do. For the first time in my life, I do not know. If I break with her, perhaps she kill herself. Once, she have tried—why not again? More likely—for she is happy now, and she have never been happy. It is worse to return to misery than to stay in it. But that is not all. Listen!"

He finished his drink.

"I become fond of her, as I have never been fond of a woman. She affect me. To explain is not easy. I put it

like this. I had a hard—a bitter—childhood. But, do you know, she is so happy that she make me feel a child—a happy child. I seem in a fairy story. Never have I known that before. The business which bring me to London last much longer than I think—much longer. The days, the weeks, pass. One thing she often say I do not understand. It is this. She say that even if she cannot live with me, she want her husband to divorce her. That I do not understand. And now, tell me, what would you have done in my place?"

"God knows!"

"There is no God, my friend. He is an invention of the weak. Life is mystery. The strong accept the fact—the weak make up stories. In London, I tell myself it must stop. As if I would leave my son for her! And, anyhow, I would not want to live with her. To live with a child? It is charming to play with one, but to live with one? No! I tell her perhaps it is better for her to go back to her husband. Tears—hysteria. Sooner would she die. And then she tell me I am God."

"That was a bit awkward—as you don't think there is one."

"Ah, my friend, it is, as you say, a bit awkward. When she say I am God, we are on the Chelsea embankment. I have a slight cold. It is an autumn night. I point to a sky sparkling with stars—to the water—to the trees—to a man on a bench. To her, I say: 'The sky, the trees, the stars, that man on the bench—mysteries!' That is what I tell her when she say I am God."

Pause.

"But the time come I must go back to Verna. I tell her I am not independent in business. I tell her, perhaps, I become independent. I tell her I know not what. The day come near for me to go. She look at me like a frightened child. What am I to do? Tell her the truth? It is not possible. The day come and I go. Soon, I hear she is ill. She have gone to Hove—she have an attendant. I write less often. I get hysterical letters from her—almost every day. She will kill herself! She will never return to her husband! To myself, I say: 'This must end.' I write very short letters. I tell her my wife is worse. I weary of it all. I say I have to travel. And then Olivairre telephone. And, to-day, you arrive. Come! We have another drink."

He called the waiter and for a few moments Brent became aware of surroundings. The fact that he had entirely forgotten them revealed how wholly Yashvin had filled his horizon.

The drinks were brought, then Yashvin said :

"I have told you all—all ! Now you tell me what you think."

"That's not easy. A lot you've said is very different from anything I expected to hear. But one thing is clear—if you hadn't been afraid of what she might do, you'd have walked out on her long ago."

"But of course ! If when I go to London I find she lie about suicide, I tell her she is a fool, then send her back to her husband. But I know she might do anything."

"Doesn't that explain Oliver's behaviour too ?"

"But he is her *husband* ! When he meet her in Paris and she tell him, he should have brought her back here. To me, he should say : 'My wife in love with you. Will you take her ?' I say : 'No. I will not take her.' That would have been the end—and Olivairre appear generous. Women like that. Also, his offer to give her to me would hurt her vanity. And my refusal to have her would hurt her vanity. But what does Olivairre do ? Nothing ! He come here now only because she send him. Listen !"

But before he could continue, Brent asked :

"What would you have done if you'd been her husband ?"

"If she tell me she love another man ! I say : 'Get out !' If she do not go, I throw her out ! I do not bother whether the man will have her. I tell you again, I am not Olivairre. She blackmail him. 'Do what I want, or I kill myself.' That is what she say."

"That's all very well, but that threat worked with you for a time."

"It worked on me—for a few months ! It work no longer. I would much rather she kill herself than me. Much rather. If I were her husband, the threat would not work at all. Also, do you think that—if she were my wife—I let her go alone to the Miramar ? Do you think I believe the nonsense about the independence of women ? I am not an Englishman or an American. Just now you say to me—if you were her husband. But tell me, please, do you think I ever marry a woman like her ? One look—only one—tell

me all. The eyes—they are remarkable—but one does not marry a woman with eyes like that. And now I ask you something. On my knees, I ask you: WHY did Olivairre marry her?"

"I don't know the answer to that."

"He know, before he marry her, that she throw herself out of a window?"

"Yes, he knew."

"Had she money? Did he want money then?"

"Good Lord, no!"

"She tell me that, when he ask her to marry him, she say she do not love him. Is it true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Ah! We waste the time, my friend, wondering whether she kill herself. It is Olivairre who has committed suicide."

"Perhaps you're right and——"

"A moment, please! About yourself you say nothing. Why do you do all this for her? You love her? Yes?"

"No, but I owe her quite a bit one way and another. And I'm damned sorry for her—and sorry for him too. Still, I admit I've had about enough of it. It's been going on for months."

"Ah, you have sense! It has to stop. We arrange now how to stop it. As for me, I will not see her again—and I will write only one more letter. I tire of it. More, I have difficulties—real difficulties. Business, it is bad. Every day, money is harder to get. I tell you, because I trust you, that things are not easy with my partner. So it have to stop."

"There's only one chance, Yashvin, to stop this without her doing something desperate. It's this. You will have to end it romantically."

"Please! I do not understand."

"Well, you can't tell her what you've told me, can you?"

"But of course I cannot! One never tells facts to women."

"The only thing I can think of is this. You must write and say you tried to discuss divorce with your wife—with devastating results. Then you can add that you know that she, Merle, would never know happiness if that happiness were built on another's misery."

"Ah, that is brilliant—about her happiness being built on another's misery. Never would I have thought of that."

"I probably got it from somewhere. Anyhow, I take it the results *would* be devastating if you told your wife you wanted a divorce."

"Of course! It is too stupid to think of it. But what you say, it is perfect. We give a romantic reason for an unhappy ending. My friend, you should go to Hollywood."

They discussed this solution at length, eventually deciding that it should be the text of Yashvin's last letter to Merle, which he would write soon after Brent's return to London.

"It is perfect! You solve the whole thing. We make of her a martyr. Her soul take the veil."

"That's all very well, Yashvin, but it leaves one thing out."

"And what is that?"

"How is she going to live with Oliver? She'll always be contrasting him with what she imagines you to be. You've given her an ideal standard—and she'll relate everything to it."

"It will not be like that. She is romantic. She dramatise everything. Even Olivairre. She patronise him. Every one know of her sacrifice. She cease to be a child. She become tragic and she dress the part. Women are happy if they have something to dress for."

"I doubt it, but, even if you're right, what sort of a life is it going to be for Oliver?"

"There can be no life for Olivairre because he is dead. You waste your time, my friend—you can do nothing for a fool. He marry a *déséquilibrée* and he know that before he propose to her. The fact stare at him. Ask yourself! The first time she leave him—to come to Verna—the very first time she leave him, she at once fall in love with another man. And yet you hear him tell me she was perfectly happy! And I tell you this—Olivairre is not in love with her. Jealous maybe: in love, no! Always he have been in love with his own pride—with his success—with his position."

"Then what kind of a woman do you think he should have married?"

"He should have married a fool. The choice would be wide. Merle is foolish—but not a fool. All her unhappiness come from that. All happy women are fools. Olivairre

should have married one. Then he have no criticism—and he loathe criticism. It make him see himself—and he want only to see his success. Really, he do not want a woman for a wife.”

“What does he want, then?”

“A shop-window—to display his wealth. That is all. I tell you, he do the impossible. He narrow himself to make money. He make money. *Bon!* Then he try to broaden—he try to live. He is like a boxer who disciplines himself to become champion of the world. He become champion. *Bon!* Then he go mad on women—and he still think to remain champion. My friend, there are rules—for ambition as for everything else. To succeed you must narrow yourself. You accept—how do you say?—limitation. Like a captive bird, you must learn to live in a cage. You may sing in it; or die in it. Olivairre get what he want—success. And he does what? He marry a woman who do not want a lot of money but who want romance. I have talked to Merle much about her husband. Her answers to my questions tell me much. I say yet again—you can do nothing for a fool.”

“All right, let’s accept that. And now you tell me what limitations you accept, because I haven’t noticed any yet.”

“Aha! That is good! I tell you! What I just say, it is what I think—and a man never do what he think, he do what he feel. You feel with the whole of yourself; you think only with the head. I am the opposite to Olivairre. It is why I understand him. He is success. I am failure. And I am failure because I ask only one thing—to live. To live every moment. To slave for ten—for fifteen—years to make money? No! For me, there is only *now*. Never have there been anything else. I am here with you. Nothing else exist for me. Nothing! I have too many natures to make a career. For me, there is no past, and there is no future—there is now.”

“Well, there it all is. I still think that, if Merle returns to Oliver, anything may happen, but there’s nothing I can do about it. You’ve no proposition to make—and she will have to face the fact. You’ll wrap that fact up romantically—and we must hope for the best.”

Brent looked at his watch.

“God! It’s damned late! We must go. I don’t know what I’m going to tell Oliver.”

The waiter got their coats, then bowed them out. A brilliant moon rode high in a clear heaven. The houses cast coal-black shadows on the snow.

They walked in silence, then, as they neared the hotel, Yashvin said :

" You leave in the morning ? "

" I suppose so. There's no point in your talking to him again. Is there an early train to Milan ? "

" No. You go by car. "

" The snow's pretty thick. "

" You have chains on the wheels. "

Then Yashvin added :

" I come in the morning to say good-bye. I bring my partner with me. "

" What on earth for ? "

" Things are difficult between us. My partner see Olivairre—he see at once he is a rich Englishman. He think I have business with him. Also, it is necessary that others think that. Why, otherwise, did the rich Englishman come for a night ? In winter, the coming of any one to Verna to see me is noticed. So I kill—how do you say?—the two birds with the one stone. "

They parted in the lounge of the hotel, then Brent made his way up the creaking stairs—at the top of which he found Markham.

" Thank the Lord it's you, Rod ! I've been worried about you. I thought you must have gone to a bad house with that blackguard. Where on earth have you been ? "

" In a café. Anyhow, to cut all the details, it comes to this :—he's nothing to offer Merle, and he's going to write and tell her so. "

" You're a damned good fellow ! I don't know what I'd have done without you. How you can say one word to that criminal, beats me ! Well, we'd better go to bed. I'll never get over one thing, Rod. She thinks she wants—*that* ! "

After saying good-night, Markham turned and said :

" The central heating isn't working, so you'll find it pretty cold. Fancy getting us rooms in this hole ! "

3

Brent went to his room, took off his overcoat, and instantly discovered that Markham's comment about the cold was an under-statement.

He undressed quickly, put on a thick dressing-gown, then got into the antagonistic-looking bed—which was about as comfortable as a contour map of the Alps. He twisted from side to side till he found something resembling a valley, then lit a cigarette.

So many problems challenged him that he decided to ignore most of them, including the one relating to his position as intermediary between Markham and Merle. He now knew that Yashvin and Merle had been lovers and this knowledge would inevitably affect his strategy in the immediate future. Later, he would have to confront this issue, but, now, his interest in Yashvin was so paramount that it reduced all other subjects to insignificance.

What Brent had to do was to establish liaison between the Yashvin he had met—and the Yashvin who existed in Merle's imagination. He had to discover lines of communication between the man and the myth.

At first glance, the gap between them seemed enormous, but Brent soon recognised that it was neither so wide nor so deep as it appeared. One had only to imagine Yashvin with a woman in order to realise that he would probably possess powerful influence, which would be doubly potent with a harassed being like Merle. Yashvin had admitted that, where women were concerned, not more than half of himself was engaged, but how many of them would be aware of that? Certainly not Merle. Yashvin was so emotionally rich—he dedicated himself so wholly to the present—that most women would accept the appearance for the reality.

It was not difficult to imagine him with Merle. The ruthless intelligence would be turned off like a tap: the "superman" philosophy would remain in cold storage. Yashvin would be in holiday mood. ("With women, one is half of oneself. It is why one likes to be with them. It is a holiday from facts.") It was easy enough to assess his effect upon unhappy Merle. His gift of creating a gala atmosphere—his total lack of self-consciousness—his gay confidence—would seem god-like qualities to her.

Brent put his cigarette out, then lit another. He felt he was getting somewhere.

Another important point was that there were no problems for Yashvin—there were only problems for Merle. How should she know that he was free because he inhabited a level on which problems are not operative? Besides, in one

sense, Yashvin *was* free. There was no division in his will. Conflict did not exist for him. He revelled in his own personality like a boy in a toy shop.

It was not surprising that he smoothed out all the wrinkles in Merle's neurotic nature. His lack of values would seem like freedom to her. He would be a gateway to a simplified world, where everything was spontaneous—inevitable. In her eyes, he would soar like a god above the limitations of humdrum humanity. She would remain blind to the fact that he was not above those limitations but outside them.

Also, and above all, Yashvin had a vast love of life—a huge zest for the adventure of being alive. No one, with the single exception of Markham, could be in Yashvin's presence for five minutes without responding to the insurgent energy springing from this abounding love of life. Other people's pulses beat, but Yashvin's sang. His vitality recognised no problems. It recognised nothing but its own endlessly renewed exuberance.

Brent put his cigarette out, then pulled the quilt more closely round him. It certainly was devilish cold.

Yes, he could see how Merle's illusion had come into being and, possibly, Yashvin was the one man in the world who could have created it. Soon, that illusion would be dissipated—with unguessable results.

But, apart from Merle, Brent's curiosity was kindled by Yashvin, for the compelling reason that he had never encountered any one in the least like him. Brent had not only met most types but had a trained imagination and was accustomed, therefore, to identify himself with the temperaments of others. To do this with Yashvin, however, proved very difficult for many reasons; one of the chief being that Brent failed to find answers to a number of questions which presented themselves.

Why had Yashvin confided in him? Why had he revealed that Merle and he had been lovers? Why had he so confidently assumed that Merle had lied on this subject? Or did he know she had lied? But, if he knew, why had he not said so? By any standards, it was extraordinary that Yashvin should have shared a secret of this nature with a stranger on the first day of their first meeting. He had said that one glance told him everything about a person, but did he really back his intuitions to that extent? It seemed

ridiculous, but, when Brent remembered Yashvin's analysis of Markham—an analysis which remained remarkable after allowance had been made for his cross-examination of Merle about her husband—it was difficult not to respect his intuitive faculty.

Other questions emerged.

Had Yashvin a wife and a son? The photograph he had produced of the latter had no evidential value. The mad wife and the young son might be the merest fictions. They might be no more than a strategic strong-point to which Yashvin retreated when his affairs with "luxury" women became embarrassingly intricate.

But, apart from these possibilities, Brent's curiosity flamed round Yashvin as a human being. Whether he was an adventurer or not, had purely secondary significance. The breadth, scope, vitality, and contradictions of the man fascinated Brent. Yashvin was one of those rare human beings who unleash imagination. He unleashed imagination simply because it was impossible to determine his essential quality.

For instance, quite a definite person emerged if one isolated one section of his conversation. But one had only to contrast this with another section in order to be reduced to bewilderment. If, for example, one isolated his "philosophy" with its insistence that there were only two classes, the strong and the weak—and that God was an invention of the latter—one might conclude that Yashvin was a cynic. This would be a lamentably false conclusion, as a cynic is a despairing moralist, whereas Yashvin was entirely amoral. But if one contrasted this "philosophy" with his description of his discovery that Merle was a child, they cancelled out. ("She love like a child; she laugh like a child; she happy like a child. . . . She live a fairy story. . . . I seem in a fairy story.") Nevertheless, Brent felt that Yashvin was whole on his level—that every word he uttered proceeded from his temperament, not his brain. His was the voice of exuberance, in love with itself.

When Brent reached this point in his rôle of detective, he decided he was smoking too many cigarettes, so he sprang up, got his pipe, then flung his overcoat on the bed, although he realised that his inability to get warm was due chiefly to the thinness of the mattress.

From the immediate point of view, one fact stood out a mile—the end was at hand. Merle would receive a final letter from Yashvin. Then—silence. What the result would be, Brent hadn't a guess.

In one way, the most fantastic aspect of this fantastic visit to Verna was the manner in which Yashvin proposed to use it in order to deceive his partner. When Brent compared the real reason for Markham's trip to Verna with the one which Yashvin was going to make it assume in the eyes of his partner, he shook with laughter. His partner would think that Markham, the rich Englishman, had come to Verna for business reasons. That was genius! It was genius, because it made unfavourable circumstances serve a secret end. Which is what genius has to do in a world inimical to it.

Anyhow, Markham and he would leave for Milan in the morning and he would never see Yashvin again—never find answers to the many questions which kept popping up in his mind, like pantomime demons through trap-doors.

They would leave to-morrow. And Yashvin, who had exploded the Markham-Merle world, would vanish into obscurity.

For Brent, that fact had drama. Yashvin had come from a void—and would go to a void. He was no more integrally related to the situation he had created than a spark is to the heap of gunpowder it ignites. Actually, he was remote from that situation, which had come into being, not as a result of what he was, but as the result of what Merle imagined him to be. Yashvin would remain as ignorant of his real effect on her as a clock remains ignorant of the function it performs. Through meeting him, Merle had glimpsed paradise.

Then Brent remembered that Boehme, the German mystic, had experienced his first great illumination through seeing the rays of the sun reflected from a pewter plate. It would be understandable if one of smaller stature than Boehme confused the pewter plate with the vision it had seemingly caused.

Merle identified Yashvin with the glimpse of paradise she had gained as a result of meeting him. Nevertheless, life had been revealed to her in terms of spiritual perspective and, as Brent saw it, that was the essential. He was probably prejudiced in thinking this because, in his present

state, he would have welcomed any experience which made real again the illusion which had sustained him as a writer. In Brent's belief, the element of illusion enters into every vision of reality—even Boehme's. That is inevitable, for human receptivity is wholly unable to accommodate the absolute reality which lies outstretched beneath the eyes of God. For a mortal, shackled to relativity, anything that creates wonder—anything which reveals the spiritual structure of life—is a gift from on high. And any one privileged to receive this gift, who then watches it dwindle and fade, knows a death compared with which the death of the body is negligible.

That's how Brent saw it—and had cogent personal reasons for seeing it like that.

Yashvin would vanish into obscurity. He would never know the final result of the explosion he had caused, for he was unaware of the essential nature of that explosion. A man can create a situation, and remain remote from it.

Merle happened to go to Verna : Yashvin happened to be there : the effect happened to be what it was. That's all one could say. Yashvin was an incident. But most major events are derived from seemingly fortuitous incidents. Desdemona drops a handkerchief. . . .

Brent put his pipe down. He must go to sleep. In thirty-six hours he would probably be in England and he would need all his wits to give Merle an account of his conversation with Yashvin—an edited account.

He switched off the light, turned over, then pulled the bedclothes to the tip of his nose.

CHAPTER III

RETURN

BRENT had dressed and was now standing by the window, looking at wintry wastes. Mist reduced everything to a uniform blur : shadowy men were shovelling snow from the embankment into the lake.

The door opened and a haggard Markham appeared.

" 'Morning, Rod. Get any sleep ? "

" Not much. Did you ? "

" Likely to sleep—after meeting that blackguard ! "

"You really found him worse than you expected?"

"Worse? He's a criminal. Any one can see that. He's got the wrists of a gorilla."

"Well, there it is. I don't know what you think, but I suggest that we go to Milan directly after breakfast. Otherwise, we'll have to hang about here for hours and I don't see any point in talking to Yashvin. Everything's been said."

"I assure you *I'm* not talking to him again. Is there an early train to Milan?"

"Don't think so, but we can get a car. I'm told it will be all right if we have chains on the wheels. One other thing—I take it you'd like to go back to London as soon as you can?"

"I certainly would. But if you want to go on somewhere, we'll go."

"No, it doesn't matter. I'll be coming abroad again soon."

"I hope I never shall. Never! Let's go and get this damned breakfast over."

An hour later, they were standing in the hall, surrounded by suitcases, waiting for a car to take them to Milan. Regiments of people had been tipped: the manager was talking enthusiastic Italian to Markham, despite the latter's catacomb silence. A diminutive page boy with angelic eyes kept darting out to see if the car had arrived. Various persons lingered in the lounge, staring at the "rich Englishmen," whose departure—after a stay of only a few hours—created a greater sensation than their arrival.

The page boy rushed in. The car had arrived! Gesticulations all round! The chains on the wheels were inspected: pessimistic prophecies darkened the air: the manager bounced like a ball as the result of a munificent tip.

Markham and Brent went to the waiting car and, just as they reached it, Yashvin appeared—accompanied by his partner.

"Ah, Mr. Markham! I just hear you go early. Permit me. My partner."

He presented a lanky sallow individual with a remarkably prominent nose and black beady eyes.

"Listen! All—it is arranged. I write the letter, confirming. I write him soon. A good journey! You come again—and we give you better weather."

Markham got into the car, followed by Brent. A

moment later, it moved slowly down the snow-piled street.

Brent turned in order to get a final glimpse of Yashvin. There he was, talking enthusiastically to his tall companion, punctuating his remarks with expansive gestures.

Directly the hotel was out of sight, Markham asked :

" Who, do you imagine, was that other cut-throat ? "

" Didn't you hear ? That's his partner."

" His—*partner* ! "

Silence.

Progress was slow and spasmodic. The wheels frequently rotated furiously in the snow while the car remained stationary. When nearly an hour had passed and they were very cold and bored, the driver pulled up with an air of finality and began a long harangue in Italian.

Markham had no knowledge of that language and Brent had little. Eventually, however, the latter managed to discover that the driver did not know the way to Milan.

That seemed incredible to Brent, but Markham's manner implied that he would have been vastly surprised if a life-long inhabitant of Verna, who drove a taxi, knew the way to Milan which was only a few miles from his home town. His manner also implied that he did not care in the least if they died of exposure in the snowy waste.

" Damn it ! " Brent exclaimed. " The fool *must* know the way ! He's playing up for a big tip."

Then, in the most frightful Italian, he told the man to drive on till he met someone who could direct him.

When it became evident that they were nearing their destination, Brent asked :

" Ever been to Milan before ? "

" No. And I shall take very good care never to come again. When does the train leave for Basle ? "

" About two-thirty. We'd better go to the Central and leave our things."

Possibly the Central Station at Milan is the most impressive in the world, but Markham regarded it as if it were a wayside ' halt ' on a branch line.

Having deposited their suitcases, Brent suggested they should have a look round as they had a good deal of time to fill in before lunch.

When they reached the Piazza del Duomo, Markham asked :

" You've been to this hole before, haven't you ? "

"Often. What do you think of the cathedral?"

"It's all right, I suppose. They like it. And they can have it, so far as I am concerned."

Brent gazed at the innumerable statues of saints, which cover the entire edifice, peeping out of Gothic niches, standing on the extreme points of pinnacles, and remembered how these "stone people" had bewitched and bewildered Heine.

"I tell you what," he said at last, "we'll go to the Galleria. Those long lofty galleries are fascinating. Besides, I know a café where we can get good coffee."

"It's all one to me."

They went to the café, ordered coffee, then silence again descended.

Brent decided to make another conversational attempt.

"Extraordinary thing," he began, "that the Milanese who love strolling up and down this place, or having a drink and watching the passers-by, are always on the look-out for English and American blondes. They don't seem interested in their own women—the dark Southern type, with melting black eyes."

"Just what I should expect."

Silence.

Brent launched a final attempt.

"Milan's a deceptive place," he announced. "For instance, on the surface everything looks a model of law and order, but, actually, Milan is probably the most revolutionary city in Italy."

"They can blow it to bits, now, for all I care."

Silence—long and profound.

Suddenly Markham turned to Brent and said:

"She wanted a romance for years."

"You never told me that."

"For three or four years before she met that black-guard. I didn't take any notice at the time. Matter of fact, I only remembered a few weeks ago that she was always saying she wanted a romance. Well, she picked a pretty specimen to have one with."

After a pause, he added:

"Do you really believe that lout will write telling her he's through?"

"I'm certain he will."

Pause.

"In your way, you're a damned clever fellow, Rod."

"I don't think I am. Anyway, cleverness was never much good to any one."

"Well, I say again: how the hell you managed to speak to that criminal is a mystery to me. And how you got him to say he'd come out into the open with Merle is a miracle."

Then he added, almost to himself:

"I'll get her back soon."

Brent glanced at him. Markham was leaning forward, staring at nothing. He looked worn and wretched.

"You've had a hell of a time, Oliver."

"You don't know half my worries. I'm finished, Rod. I know it, but I won't face it."

After a silence, he went on:

"What a hell of a thing marriage can be! What it can do to you! What it can break in you!"

He rose abruptly, then they wandered about till they lunched at the station restaurant.

They travelled to Basle—slept in the Boulogne train—and reached London the next afternoon. It had been thawing for some hours, so the streets were full of slush.

"Better come to the flat, Rod. I expect you can do with a drink."

"I certainly can."

When they entered the sitting-room, Markham looked round.

"Seems half a lifetime since I left here."

"I believe it. If I don't get some sleep soon, I shall pack up for good."

Celia brought in the whisky, then gave Markham a letter.

"Mr. Wade left this for you, sir. He says it's important."

"Very well."

Markham threw the letter aside.

"What's the programme, Rod?"

"I've been thinking about it, coming up in the train. I thought I'd go to Hove to-morrow and have a talk with Merle. It would be easier for me to give an account of our trip than it would be for you."

"That's certain."

"Right! That's what we'll do. And now I think I'd better go. I've plenty to think about."

"I can't thank you for what you've done. I don't know any other man who could have done it."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Then you tell me someone I know who could have handled that criminal."

"What about Dawes?"

Markham's glass stopped half-way to his lips.

At last he said:

"What's your opinion of Dawes?"

"He's pretty shrewd."

"He's shrewd enough."

Markham rose abruptly.

"Don't go for a minute. Let's see what Wade wants."

He opened the letter and, a moment later, exclaimed:

"This is pretty rich! Wade hasn't been near me for two months—and now says he wants to see me directly I get back. And he also says he's a good tip for me."

"Why not see him to-morrow, when I'm with Merle? It's better than being on your own. You'll only go over it all again and again."

"Perhaps you're right. I'll telephone Wade."

"Good! See you before long."

Part IV—Dawes

CHAPTER I

MERLE AND BRENT

I

WHEN Brent arrived at Brighton, he did not go straight to Merle's hotel. He walked to the front, then decided to have a stroll on the West Pier before getting a bus to Hove.

An east wind was raging, so there were not many people about, but he did not notice the wind, or the sombre sky, or the sullen sea. Physically, he felt exhausted, having had practically no sleep for five nights, nevertheless he was determined to remain alert mentally. He would need all his wits for this meeting with Merle, who had insight approaching clairvoyance and who might, therefore, attribute importance to a remark which he would regard as trivial. And if he were silent on certain subjects, she might find that silence revealing.

The more he visualised this meeting, the more certain it seemed that what he actually said would be secondary to her. She would assess his account of the Verna trip in terms inaccessible to him. Not only was he concerned with a woman, but with one vitally involved, so every intuition she possessed would be on tiptoe. For him, their conversation was a job to be done: for her, it was a life or death sentence.

He reached the end of the pier, then stood looking at a hungry sea. He needed an inspiration, but unfortunately, he had never felt less inspired.

"She's too damned quick—that's the devil of it! It won't do to make any mistakes."

Five minutes passed, but he did not move. He knew he would fail unless he could discover a main theme to which everything he said to Merle would be related—and to which everything he did *not* say would be related.

"I wish to heaven Yashvin hadn't told me they'd been lovers. If she guesses I'm hiding something, I'll be done. And she's pretty good at guessing."

The more he considered his commission, the more

difficult its execution seemed. There were a hell of a lot of things he'd have to explain. Why had they returned so quickly? Why had he come to report, not Oliver? Should he reveal that he'd spent hours alone with Yashvin? If so, how could he give a verbatim account of their conversation? Should he tell her Yashvin was going to write? Should he indicate what the contents of that letter would be?

He glanced at his watch. He'd have to go and chance to luck. Lacking a main theme, she would be almost certain to guess that he was hiding something—and that would be fatal, because she would lose confidence in him.

He began to walk slowly towards the entrance to the pier, experiencing a negative relief in giving up the attempt to find a solution. The simple fact was that he felt too tired to think, so things would have to go their own way.

Just as he reached the entrance, an idea shot into his mind.

He stopped, then stared at his shoes, thinking intently. At last he snapped his fingers.

"Damn it! It's worth trying."

2

"You look green."

That was Merle's greeting when he entered her sitting-room at the Metropole.

"Well, what do you expect? I've scarcely slept for nights."

She rose slowly, then came over to him. He had expected excitement and was not reassured by her composure, but gave no sign of this when he said:

"I must be fonder of you, Merle, than I thought. It's not fun running across Europe and back in this weather."

"You'll get something out of it. Let's sit here."

She indicated two armchairs near an electric fire.

"You sit, Merle. I'm too restless, so you won't mind if I wander about. I've a devil of a lot to tell you. So much, that I don't know where to begin."

She said nothing, but watched him as he went to and fro.

"There'll have to be a preface and——"

"How did Oliver get on with him?"

"He didn't get on with him. He couldn't say a word to him."

"But every one gets on with him! Every one! He

was known and loved for miles around! *You* liked him, didn't you?"

"A lot. He's the most interesting man I've met."

"But Oliver couldn't say a word to him?"

"Not one word."

"Is that why you've come to-day instead of him?"

"That's why."

"It's unbelievable that he couldn't talk to Boris! Yet I don't know. Oliver *would* be the one person in the whole world who couldn't."

"Well, it's a fact, anyway. But you interrupted my preface."

"I bet you've thought every word of this out. Every word of it! You've calculated it all to a hair."

Brent laughed.

"That's just where you're wrong. I tried to think it out, but it didn't come off."

He stopped near her, then added:

"Now, listen! I know you're desperately involved in all this, but you *must* put yourself in my place for once. For months now I've been a kind of liaison officer between you and Oliver. You know I haven't a lot in common with him. Well, just because of that, I decided at the beginning to be impartial—as impartial as I could. I had to be fifty-fifty, or I'd have been a humbug with Oliver. Whether I succeeded or failed, one thing's certain:—I can't be impartial any longer."

"Why not?"

"Because I've met Yashvin."

"You liked him so much?"

"Just that. Or it would be truer to say that he fascinated me. He makes my imagination race. No! Wait a minute, Merle! You've got to listen. He half-hypnotised *me*—and *Oliver* had no use for him. So how can I be impartial? I can't even tell Oliver the effect Yashvin had on me."

"Why not?"

"If I did, it would snap every link between me and Oliver. And that would not help much, so long as I'm the link between you and him."

"Well, we'll come back to this. Tell me what happened."

"All right. But we *will* come back to this."

Brent lit a cigarette, then began to pace the room again.

"I can't give a verbatim account, Merle, or I'd be here all night. I'll give the headlines—and you can ask any question you like."

He broke off, so Merle said :

"Well, go on !"

"I want to say this first. I don't want you to lose any lingering sympathy you have left for Oliver. And you easily may, when you hear what I have to tell you. I didn't start with any undue affection for Oliver, but facts are facts, and he's had a hell of a time—and it's branded him. Any one can see that. So, if you've a glimmer of sympathy for him, don't let it go out."

He put his cigarette into an ash-tray, then went on :

"From the moment we met Yashvin at the station, Oliver couldn't say a word to him. Lunch wasn't easy. It would have been an ordeal, if Yashvin hadn't taken the whole burden on his shoulders. In the afternoon, we all had a talk. Yashvin gave his account of his meeting with you at Verna. That didn't register with Oliver—who did nothing but give a catalogue of his wrongs. It was hopeless. And dinner was hopeless. After dinner, Oliver went back to the hotel and Yashvin and I had a long talk in a café."

He paused, then asked :

"Any questions ?"

"I'm listening."

"Good ! Now, I'm going to be quite frank. I don't think those days at Verna meant an awful lot to Yashvin. But what did mean a lot to him was the time he spent with you in London."

"You're—certain ?"

"Quite certain !"

"You'll never know how much that means to me."

"Well, it's a fact. I say more :—in their degree, I believe those London meetings were a unique experience for Yashvin. I think he discovered something in you which he'd not found in any other woman. I'm sure he did. But that doesn't mean they meant as much to him as they did to you."

"Why not ?"

"Because he's a man—and so he's not free. Women choose to imagine that men are free, but they—aren't. Quite apart from the fact that Yashvin is about a dozen different people."

"He isn't. He's a child."

"He says you're one, and he may be right. But he certainly isn't. He may have seemed one for a while, but that only meant he was having a week-end away from the rest of himself. Anyhow, you're determined to think he can do what he likes. Judging by what he says, he can't do anything of the kind. He isn't free financially—and he has a wife and a child. You've got to get this in perspective."

"What did you talk about in that café?"

"I'm telling you most of it indirectly. Some of it wouldn't interest you a lot as it was more or less about the way the world is run and so on."

"What did you arrange with him?"

"He's going to write to you."

"So he is going to write again?"

"Yes."

"What did he think of Oliver?"

"No use for him—just none. I've never seen such a case of mutual repulsion. There's no other word for it. Heavens! It's just like you to marry Oliver—fall in love with Yashvin—then lug me in as intermediary. That's just what——"

"You're trying to make me laugh, because you want to dodge."

"I not only want to dodge, but, from now on, I'm going to?"

"Why?"

"That gets us back to the preface. I said we'd have to come back to it."

He stopped near her, then went on:

"I told you I couldn't be impartial any longer. Well, I'm going to tell you why—the real reason. It's this. If I were a woman, I'd fall flat for Yashvin. He's just the man I would fall for. He'd sweep me away. You must have a much bigger will than I thought you had, Merle. And don't tell me—now I've met Yashvin—that he didn't want you, because I'm damned certain he did."

"If you knew everything——"

"Don't I?"

"We were lovers one night, if you want to know."

Before he could speak, she went on:

"All the same, it's nothing to do with sex."

"I believe it, Merle. At least, I believe that sex is secondary, but others won't."

"I don't mind what they believe."

"Was it because you'd been lovers that you wanted Oliver to divorce you?"

"Of course. I wanted a divorce whether I went to live with Boris or not. That's why I left Oliver—so that he could divorce me quite apart from Boris. But he wouldn't."

After a silence, she asked:

"Did he talk much about his wife?"

"Quite a lot—and his son. He showed me the boy's photograph."

He started to pace the room again. Things had gone better than he had expected and, now, he wanted to go.

"Look here, Merle. You've plenty to think about, so perhaps I'd better get a train back. You said I look green, and I certainly could do with a lot of sleep."

As she said nothing, he stopped, then looked at her.

She had risen and seemed unaware of his presence.

He put on his overcoat. Just as he was about to go, she said:

"It's over, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"He's going to write and say it's over, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I see."

He took a step towards her, but she stopped him with a movement of her hand.

"Do something for me, when you get back to town, will you?"

"Of course. Anything."

"Telephone Dawes and ask him to come and see me."

"Dawes!"

"Yes. Why not?"

"But you haven't seen him for months and months!"

"Perhaps that's why I want to now. Tell him, will you?"

"All right. But——"

"I want to be alone."

"Yes, of course. You know I'd do anything I can."

"Perhaps Dawes could come to-morrow."

"I'll get him to telephone you."

"Thank you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, bless-you."

CHAPTER II

MARKHAM AND WADE

EVERYTHING in Markham's attitude, as he sat waiting for Wade, corresponded with his psychical state. Lying back in a capacious armchair, eyes closed, a bottle of whisky and a siphon on a table by his side, he was a study in inertia—the inertia which is the physical counterpart of spiritual exhaustion.

For months Markham had lived in terms of tension—he had inhabited the Unprecedented. The result was apathy. To experience sensation after sensation eventually results in response to none; in the same way as a 'punch-drunk' boxer is insensible to pain.

Markham's meeting with Yashvin had been the end-term of this process. Before the visit to Verna, he had regarded Yashvin as a 'blackguard' but the word represented no more than a label attached to an abstraction, for Markham knew nothing of the man who had hypnotised Merle. But now, owing to the Verna visit, Yashvin was an abstraction no longer—he had emerged as a concrete and a wholly repellent human being. Merle was in love with *that*! This mystery so astounded Markham that endless attempts to solve it resulted in exhaustion, which culminated in apathy.

Nevertheless, the discovery of the incompatibility separating him from Merle made him the more determined to get her back, and, paradoxically, did not dissipate the dream that her return would end his perplexities. Desperation is too aware of its need to know anything of logic.

Suddenly he sat upright, took a pull at his drink, then looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

Brent would now be with Merle at Hove.

He rose, paced the room restlessly several times before stopping by the window.

What would Brent say to Merle? What would she say to him? He hadn't the remotest idea. They were probably talking about the Verna trip now—at this actual moment—and he hadn't a guess what they would say to each other. What guess could he have? To him, Yashvin was a monstrosity, but Brent had been able to make intimate contact with him—and Merle was in love with him! So his

inability to imagine what Brent would say to her, or she to him, did not seem very extraordinary to Markham—but it did indicate the extent of his isolation.

"Mr. Wade, sir."

"Here you are at last," Markham said, directly Celia had closed the door behind her, then he broke off and looked narrowly at his companion.

Not only had Wade's entrance lacked its customary confident jauntiness but, physically, he had altered. The squat figure seemed smaller, the lines near the mouth had deepened, and heavy pouches had appeared under the small grey eyes.

"You don't look so good."

"I've had a hell of a time, Oliver—a hell of a time!"

Wade mixed a generous whisky, then lowered himself gingerly into an armchair.

"It's been a close call this time, I can tell you."

"Well, you've had a knock coming to you for a long time. Every one knew that—except you."

"I can tell you about it now, because it's over, but damn me if I could have said a word while it was on."

"Let's have it! Some nonsense about a woman, I suppose."

Markham got a drink, then sat opposite Wade.

"I haven't seen you since November. I'd just come back from abroad—and I told you I'd run into a woman who'd got everything. Remember that?"

"I remember all right. You said that if she hadn't been something super, you wouldn't have broken the rule of a lifetime in order to run around with her."

"That's the whole point! Dolores was married—and you know I've always said I'd have nothing to do with married women. Mind you, there was no deception. She told me she was married, the first day I met her. I gathered she didn't get on with her husband. He went his way and she went hers. The usual modern set-up. Anyhow, she got me. Got me so damned good and proper that I didn't care about her being married or anything else. I was crazy—just crazy! She made other women seem like skimmed milk."

After a pause, he went on:

"We came back to London. I knew then that I ought to pull out, but I couldn't. There wasn't much risk abroad,

but there was plenty here. I took every precaution—but her husband found out.”

“What did that matter?”

“What did it matter! Hell! He threatened to divorce her.”

“Why not? You advised me to divorce Merle.”

“You don’t understand, Oliver.”

“No, I certainly do not! What I *do* understand is that you did not want Dolores’s husband to divorce her, because that affected *you*.”

“You don’t understand,” Wade repeated. “Dolores is different from any woman I’ve ever met. I’d be scared to marry her.”

“Scared!”

“Absolutely! She’s—terrific! All right for a mistress—but marry her? Not me! In some moods she’s capable of anything. I wouldn’t put murder past her. She frightened me out of my life more than once, and I don’t mind admitting it. Quite apart from the fact that, to marry Dolores, I’d have to get Dollie to divorce me.”

“Bit late in the day to start thinking about your wife, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t know! I’ve been seeing Dollie quite a bit lately. Couldn’t stand being alone. That’s why.”

“Well, get on with it!”

“I discovered that Dolores and her husband were fond of each other in their way. The trouble was money. She just had to have a good time and he couldn’t give her one. But when he found out about me, he raised red hell. He’d sling her out—he’d divorce her—I’m damned if I know what he wouldn’t do. It makes me sweat to think of it.”

“I can guess what you did?”

“What’s that?”

“You consulted Spencer Oliphant. You said I needed expert advice when I was in a jam, so, when *you* were in a jam, you got expert advice, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t got to Oliphant.”

“You didn’t! You were damned good at handing out advice to me, weren’t you? You knew exactly what I ought to do, didn’t you? I must get expert advice, but *you* didn’t need expert advice! Not a bit of it! You’re like all the rest. You’re one man when you’re in a ring-side seat—and quite another when you’re in the ring.”

"Of course I am! And so are you! If you'd heard, a year ago, about a wife who'd treated her husband as Merle's treated you, wouldn't you have said he was a damned fool not to sling her out? No one quicker!"

"Well, what *did* you do?"

"One night I was so damned miserable that I had to tell someone. So I told Dawes."

Before Markham could speak, Wade went on:

"Yes, I know! You wonder why I didn't come to you. I'll tell you."

Wade lit a cigarette.

"You know, Oliver, I've been friendly with Dawes for a long time, but it's only lately that I've discovered something about him."

"What's that?"

"He's got a touch of genius. People like us think that the only men with brains are the ones who make money. We're wrong. Dawes hasn't made money, but, outside my own game, he's ten times my brains."

"So you told Dawes."

"Yes. And, as it happens, it was the biggest bit of luck I've ever had that I did tell him."

"Why?"

"He knows Dolores's husband. Don't you think that a hell of a coincidence?"

"I certainly do."

"He didn't know him well, but he did know him."

"So you let Dawes arrange things?"

"Absolutely! And he got me out. But, mind you, it cost me a packet. It cost me a hell of a packet!"

"I don't doubt it."

"Dawes didn't find it too easy to fix things, but, as the trouble between Dolores and her husband was money, in the end money did the trick. But it cost me the earth. If you looked at my bank account, you'd think there'd been an earthquake. It cost me so much that I'll have to get back into the game—right back into it."

Markham rose, then stood looking down at Wade.

"Get back into the game!" he echoed contemptuously.

"Have you taken a good look at yourself in the glass lately? You and I will never get back into the business game. Never! You know what it takes—and you know you haven't got it. A man has only one drive to put in—

and we put ours in long ago. Never thought you'd start dreaming."

"I bet you dream a bit nowadays. There are some facts a man can't face and that's all there is to it. Anyhow, I'll either have to make money—or live a lot cheaper. I had hopes in a merger last autumn, but it didn't come off."

After a pause, he continued:

"I've learned a hell of a lot about myself these last few months. Would you believe this? I'm out of this Dolores business, so you'd think it's over, wouldn't you? Not a bit of it! Sometimes I think I'll *have* to see her again. It's uncanny. I'll be walking along, thinking about nothing, and, suddenly, I'm all ablaze like a firework. It's a knock-out. I've heard men talk about having a woman in your blood—and I know now what it means. I was telling Dawes last night about the sudden fits I get for Dolores. You can tell Dawes anything, because you can't surprise him."

"So I imagine."

Wade started to develop this theme, but Markham interrupted:

"Just a minute! When did you first run into this woman?"

"In a hotel—in France."

"On her own?"

"Yes."

"Had she come straight from England?"

"She had. Just had a row with her husband."

"And she never mentioned Dawes, although her husband knew him?"

"He had plenty of friends she didn't know."

"How—exactly—did you come to mention this Dolores business to Dawes?"

"It was this way. You know I always go into Prince's for a drink at six? I have for years. Well, I was there one evening in a hell of a state. In came Dawes and we started talking. Then he said I wasn't looking too good and asked what was wrong."

"I see."

"He's quick as quicksilver. He's always ten moves ahead. You can't tell him a thing he hasn't thought of. I'd be sorry to be up against him. Don't fancy he'd stop at much."

"How do you know he'll keep his mouth shut about you and Dolores?"

"I'm not worrying about that. I've known Dawes a long time, but I've never heard him chat about other people's affairs. Anyhow, he's done me a good turn."

"Did you give him anything?"

"He wouldn't take it. What do you think of that?"

"It just shows what odd standards some people have."

Wade rose, got another drink, then lowered himself into his armchair.

"One thing's certain, Oliver. I can't stand being alone. I spend a lot of evenings with Dollie and——"

"Did you meet the husband?"

"Not me!"

"Have you told Dollie about all this?"

"Not likely! What's it got to do with her? I see her to forget it—not to talk about it. The whole thing has had a queer effect on me."

"What sort of effect?"

"Not easy to say. I've surprised myself—if you know what I mean. I always had myself in hand—always knew what I was doing—always spotted a red light. But, this time, I lost grip. Something seemed to explode inside. How do I know it won't happen again? That's what I keep asking myself. More than once, I've had my hand on the telephone to ring her up. It's not funny to find that part of yourself is a lunatic."

After a pause, he added: "But what beats me is that there was only one man who could save me—and I happened to know him—and I happened to tell him."

"And he happened to ask what was worrying you."

"I know. It's a knock-out."

There was a long silence, then Markham said:

"You're right. Dawes has brains and we're a couple of fools."

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that!"

"Wouldn't you?"

"No. All I mean is that, if Dawes had gone in for making money, he'd have pulled down a packet."

"I dare say he does better than you think."

After a pause, Markham continued:

"I'm expecting Brent soon but, before you go, haven't you a tip for me? You said you had, in your letter."

"Yes, I've got one, but don't fly off the handle when you hear it. It's not advice, mind, it's a tip."

"Well, get on with it."

"Listen! You've just been to Italy with Brent. No! I'm not asking what happened. Doesn't interest me. My point's this. For months and months you've stuck to Brent and it's got you nowhere."

"So you suggest—what?"

"You might do worse than consult Dawes."

"That's the tip, is it?"

"That's it. But, if you do bring Dawes into this, you'll have to tell him everything. No good trying to keep anything back."

"So I imagine."

Wade rose.

"Think it over. Merle hasn't seen Dawes for months, so perhaps he'd be able to knock some sense into her head. Don't think I'm saying anything against Brent. I don't doubt he's clever enough in his own way, but, remember, Dawes lives by his wits."

"I haven't forgotten it."

"Well, it takes doing nowadays. In fact, how the hell he *does* do it, beats me."

"Have you told him so?"

"Yes. He only laughed and said he managed to rub along somehow. Anyway, think it over. I'm off now. Don't bother. I know the way out."

Markham watched Wade walk slowly to the door. Directly he was alone, he looked at the clock. Any minute now, Brent would telephone from Hove.

He sank wearily into an armchair, then closed his eyes.

CHAPTER III

ATALANTA PARK HOTEL

I

MERLE had returned to Markham.

The decision was a sudden one and had been preceded by the following events:—Immediately after Brent's visit to Hove, Dawes had gone to see Merle at the Metropole: the next day, Yashvin's letter had arrived: the day after, she went back to Markham.

She seemed like a somnambulist—with the result that

Markham experienced the extraordinary sensation of living with a person actually present, but spiritually remote—nevertheless he derived deep consolation from her return. To watch her seated opposite ; to listen to her moving about in the next room ; to hear her call Celia—not only reminded him that his isolation had ended, but encouraged the hope that Yashvin would soon become an incident and, finally, a dream.

This consolation persisted despite the fact that, when they were alone, they spoke seldom and usually about trivial affairs. She did not mention the boys and rarely referred to Agatha. Also, she said nothing about his meeting with Yashvin and neither did he. The Verna visit was ignored and although her silence revealed, by implication, her knowledge of his inability to say one word to Yashvin, he was glad that the necessity to admit this had been removed. Had he been compelled to tell her that any contact between himself and Yashvin had proved impossible, it would inevitably have lengthened the distance dividing him from her.

She had revealed that she and Yashvin had been lovers and had reminded him how, again and again, after her return from Paris, she had begged him to divorce her, but her tone implied that all this was now utterly unimportant—that it related to someone they had known long ago and had half-forgotten.

This revelation kindled Markham's resentment against Yashvin into flame, but, nevertheless, it was a relief that Merle's fanaticism for her lover had been reduced to the sexual level. It was a relief, because her former claim that her love had nothing to do with sex—that Yashvin was God—had deprived Markham of every weapon in his fight to hold her. It had confronted him with an invisible invulnerable opponent. Now, he understood. He was on familiar ground—and he would rather be furious on familiar ground than groping in a spectral region, where there were no signposts and no target for anger.

But when he was alone with Merle, he forgot about Yashvin. Her presence had an hypnotic effect, so potent, that even long silences were not embarrassing.

After dinner, they would occupy their accustomed chairs in the sitting-room, without speaking and without making a pretence of reading. Merle would gaze at the fire and he would watch her, noting how every former incipient hint of

grossness had vanished from her figure ; how the features had been purified as by flame. Noting, too, how she seemed like a child as she sat there in the firelight—a child in whom expectation had died. The ghost of a child.

Sometimes, after a silence of perhaps an hour, she would suddenly say something which revealed the destination of her thoughts. One night she said :

"I've made you very unhappy. When I was certain that happiness was an inch from me, I did not care that you were suffering. Nothing makes us so cruel as the hope of happiness. But now—now it's all over—I'm sorry. Forgive me."

"You're here, Merle. That's all I care about. You're here."

After another long silence, she said :

"It's funny, isn't it ? You and I might be in the next world. All anger's over. All argument's done. We don't hate any more—we don't hope any more. Everything that's happened lies dead between us. We're nearer than we've ever been."

"Merle !"

"Much nearer. We've both come to an end, like clocks that have stopped. You've wakened from a dream. I've wakened from a dream. And we shan't dream again."

Then, almost immediately :

"Rod telephoned to-day. Did I tell you ? He said that, now I've come back, he thought it better for him to keep out of the way, because he would only remind us of unhappy things. Perhaps he's right. He's going abroad soon. In about three weeks, I think he said."

Then, much later :

"It wouldn't make any difference, you know, if they proved the most terrible things about him. None whatever. Even if he were a murderer. You mustn't mind my talking about him. I want to tell you what really happened, but it's difficult to explain, although it's so clear to me."

After a pause, she went on :

"For each of us, there is one person in the world who can cause a miracle. If you meet that person, you see him as God sees him. That's what I really meant when I said Boris was God. I saw him as God sees him. I saw everything as God sees it. And, if that happens, you can't go back to blindness. You can't ! You *can't* !"

"Merle!"

"I'm not crying really. . . . Father saw Daphne as God sees her. That's why he couldn't live without her. I had to tell you this. Never mind if it seems nonsense now. Perhaps—later—I don't know—it may not seem nonsense."

Then she said:

"Don't go on hating Boris. I couldn't bear that. The Boris you met isn't the one I know. I saw him as God sees him. As God will see him—for ever and ever."

Directly he was alone, however, not only did his hatred of Yashvin return, but he found himself confronted by the astounding fact that Merle constantly met Dawes.

Every other day she lunched with him and they often walked together in the park. She gave no explanation of this sudden desire for his company, and Dawes dismissed it as negligible on the ground that, as she had not seen him for months, he did not remind her of the past, which she was now eager to forget.

This explanation did nothing to allay Markham's perturbation. He had become apathetic to the fact that he was wholly in Dawes's power, but, now, all his former fears returned and multiplied.

What was Dawes's motive?

The question stood like a sentry with a fixed bayonet in Markham's mind, challenging every thought. But he found no answer, and knew he would find none.

Even before discovering the manner in which Dawes had trapped Wade, Markham had been frightened of the man who had blackmailed him for months. Now, he was terrified. Wade's unconscious revelations had shown that Dawes used accomplices—and this fact gave sinister emphasis to his association with Vance.

According to Dawes, Vance was the doctor who had attended Flora before her death and it was from Vance that Dawes had learned about Markham's relations with her. But all that might be lies. It was obvious that, in the Wade affair, Dolores had been an accomplice. Vance might be another. He might be an underworld rat, whom Dawes employed to gnaw into the secret lives of prospective victims.

But, apart from these considerations, it was martyrdom for Markham to know that Merle was lunching alone with the man who knew, not only his relations with Flora, but the facts of his birth and upbringing. It was in the power of

this blackmailer to rob him of the consolation created by Merle's return—to make him despicable in her eyes at the precise and the most precious moment when she was opening her secret mind to him. This knowledge was so unbearable that desperation almost goaded him to appeal to Dawes, but he evaded this final humiliation through realising that nothing would deflect Dawes from his objective—his unimaginable objective.

Every other night the Dawes dined with them at a restaurant. Superficially, their routine reverted to the pre-Yashvin pattern but only superficially, because every one of them had altered. And although the change in Marjorie seemed less dramatic, it was notable, being derived not from the presence of new characteristics, but from the absence of old ones.

Physically, she had not altered: the almost black eyes were still remarkable; the figure still exciting; but she was seldom amusing and not often vital. After dinner, she usually remained silent, smoking cigarette after cigarette, staring at Dawes. Nowadays, it was the exception for her to dance, whereas, formerly, it had been very much the rule. Above all, her manner to Markham had changed. Once, despite continual flattery, there had been hints of content, but, now, her attitude to him was genuine. And he responded to it.

When Merle danced with Dawes—and they were always dancing together—Markham felt no constraint at finding himself alone with Marjorie.

One night, just after Merle and Dawes had left the table in order to dance, he said to her:

“Have you seen Wade lately?”

“No. Not for a long time. Why?”

“I just wondered. Probably he's not seeing a lot of people nowadays. As you know, he's taken a knock, so he's not feeling too good.”

“I don't know anything about it. At least, very little. And I don't want to. I've troubles enough of my own.”

“You have?”

“Plenty! Who hasn't?”

Then, with an obvious determination to change the subject, she added:

“Anyhow, you've got Merle back.”

“Yes—thank God!”

"I want to tell you something, before they come back. I've wanted to tell you for a long time, though it won't mean a thing to you. Why should it? Anyway, it's this:—I think you were grand about that Yashvin business. Just grand—from first to last. You went through hell."

"I'm there still," he said simply.

"I know it. . . . Talk about something else! They're coming."

Every other night the four of them dined out or went to a theatre, but the initiative never came from Merle—she merely acquiesced in whatever was proposed. Consequently it seemed impossible to refuse when, about a fortnight after her return, she suddenly suggested that they should all spend the next week-end at the Atalanta Park Hotel.

Markham agreed instantly, remembering her complaints about his refusal to go to the Atalanta in the past, although the project had no attraction for him.

Dawes made the necessary arrangements.

2

Externally, the Atalanta had altered little. Naturally, its habitués had changed, but they still consisted of successful business men who were glad to escape from London for a week-end at any time of the year. The hotel had long been an established success and had therefore become more expensive. Since Markham's time, a large swimming pool and another golf course had been added to the Atalanta's inducements, which had to be numerous as there was no town of any size in the immediate neighbourhood, although, if there had been, it would not have ranked as an attraction, because the people who stayed at this "luxury country house hotel" expected it to satisfy all their needs—golf, dancing, swimming, drinking, gambling, making love.

Markham's objection to revisiting his former haunt had been purely instinctive, consequently he had failed to foresee the effect produced by finding himself in the familiar setting of the Atalanta. Lacking imagination, he was unable to summon past events and re-create their atmosphere and background. But the very lack of this power made him the more susceptible to the influence of a place directly he returned to it. Everything he had forgotten, everything he

had failed to visualise, emerged to claim him. The tiniest detail instantly became evocative. The sluice of memory opened and the past rushed at him.

This process started directly the car passed the lodge and began to ascend the long avenue leading to the hotel. Even fragile sunlight on bare boughs recalled winter afternoons of years ago. A gap in the avenue greeted him like a friend. And when a sudden turn brought the Atalanta into view—standing on a plateau, flanked by lofty trees—memories seemed to stand at the windows, waving a welcome. So overwhelming was the effect produced that he found it strange to be here with Merle and the Dawes. They were interlopers. He was a bachelor: his old room on the first floor awaited him: Flora would know directly he entered the American bar.

When the car stopped in the forecourt, he again reflected—as he had done so often in the past—how the old house, despite ignoble change, retained mellow serenity. Again, he wondered about the family to whom this house had been home and, again, he felt a deep longing to resemble the head of that family and to live as he had lived. Again, irritation swept him that this venerable house was now a luxury hotel where a lot of rootless people, like himself, drank, gambled, or danced in rooms which regarded these activities with aristocratic detachment.

But these impressions were shallow compared with those created by entering the American bar.

He had dressed early for dinner and, as Merle seemed very occupied in her room, he went down alone to get a drink.

Nothing had altered in the American bar. With the single exception that he did not know any one, it was exactly as it had been in Flora's time.

He stopped at the entrance as if an invisible presence had barred his way. Then, feeling like a ghost who had a tryst with another, he made his way to his accustomed corner where there were several unoccupied tables.

He sat down, ordered a drink, lit a cigarette.

Echoes of a deep-toned voice with a hint of Irish brogue: glimpses of curly black hair, violet eyes, and a slightly voluptuous figure. He saw her with ever-increasing clarity: watched her gay technique with admirers; heard the rich spontaneous laugh; then, following her with his eyes as she passed from table to table, it plumed his pride to remember

that the much-admired twenty-year-old Flora was in love with him. This ardent girl, who had something immaculate about her, was in love with *him* !

He put his cigarette aside, then shut his eyes.

Instantly, another series of memories claimed him.

Evenings, nights, when a new rich vital world had opened magic doors as twilight shadowed London streets ! For the first time in his life, his presence created joy in a human being—a generous lovely human being. Eager hands were outstretched to him : ardent arms enfolded him. Trivialities became events. Everything stunted in him began to bud and blossom.

Then, as he continued to sit motionless with closed eyes, other memories confronted him.

He saw himself in the sitting-room of that Maida Vale flat—the sitting-room which she had endowed with intimacy. Faded flowers in a green vase ; his photograph on the mantelpiece. Voices. Her voice—his voice.

" I thought you'd met some girl you liked better than me. I never dreamt you'd be such a fool as to marry."

(Sitting on the edge of an armchair ; her hands half-covering her face.)

" Surely, Flora, we can part as friends. We've been very happy together and——"

" Happier than you'll ever be again."

" That's just damned nonsense !"

" It isn't. I love you—knowing you as you are. As you are. Does this other woman love you ?"

" I've told you she's going to marry me."

" That's no answer."

(Sitting on the edge of that armchair—rocking slightly to and fro.)

" I suppose you think that I ought to marry *you* !"

" It was your only chance."

" God ! I like that ! *My* only chance ! And what about you ?"

" I'd have been the happiest woman in the world."

(To get away ! To get away without an actual row !)

" Look here, Flora ! You've got to tell me what you're going to do."

" Do ? Drink myself to death, of course."

" Well, after *that*, I am going. You might have had the decency to be serious."

(The banging of a door. The banging of another. The street. Freedom!)

Suddenly memories flickered out like a film that has come to an end, but he sat motionless, wholly oblivious to surroundings.

"I thought I'd find you here—meditating."

Dawes!

Markham rose, then stared at his companion as if trying to establish his identity.

"They're down. I thought we'd dine. Merle wants to dance, so I've got a table near the ballroom."

Directly Markham saw Merle he was dimly conscious of a change in her appearance, but this dim impression was instantly obliterated by the wholly definite one that she had never been so lovely. Men at neighbouring tables were looking at her.

Without Dawes, dinner would have been a silent affair and even he failed to create anything approaching animation owing to general inertia. Merle seemed somnolent; Markham was emerging from a dream; and Marjorie's attempts to second her husband's conversational efforts lacked enthusiasm.

When coffee and liqueurs appeared, Dawes evidently decided to let things go their own way. A long silence ensued—during which he watched Merle intently, who was fidgeting with her liqueur glass.

A few moments later, the glass fell to the floor, smashing to fragments.

Almost immediately, Dawes rose and said to Merle:

"Would you care to dance?"

"I'd love to."

She rose, took his arm, then they went towards the ballroom. . . .

CHAPTER IV

TELEPHONE CALLS

I

ALTHOUGH Brent was warm in bed and fast asleep, a vague sense of disturbance slowly invaded his unconsciousness. Soon, this sense of disturbance became more and more de-

fined, till he woke with a start to discover that the telephone bell was ringing with robot regularity in the next room.

He switched on the light—looked at his watch. Four o'clock. Who the devil could be telephoning at four in the morning? He jumped out of bed, then—cursing, and wholly convinced that it was a wrong number call—he went into the next room, picked up the receiver, and said:

"Brent."

"Oh, Mr. Brent, I'm so sorry, but——"

"Celia! What on earth's happened?"

"Mr. Markham has just telephoned and——"

"But where is he?"

"Oh, of course you don't know! I'm in such a muddle I forget everything. They went with Mr. and Mrs. Dawes to the Atalanta Park Hotel for the week-end. They went yesterday. Mr. Markham has just telephoned to say that Mrs. Markham has been taken ill."

"Was she all right when she left?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"What did he say?"

"He said that, after dinner, Mrs. Markham had just started to dance with Mr. Dawes when she collapsed."

"That's queer. Was it very late?"

"I don't think so. He said, just after dinner."

"What does he want you to do? Go to the Atalanta?"

"Yes, by an early train. She hasn't come round yet."

"She's *still* unconscious?"

"That's what he said."

"They've got a doctor, of course?"

"Yes. Mr. Dawes telephoned for a doctor directly she was taken ill. I don't know *what* to think. It did give me a start when the telephone went. His voice was so strange. I didn't recognise it at first. Sounded like a man talking in his sleep."

"Did he ask you to telephone me?"

"Yes, he wants you to stay in, so that you'll be there when he telephones later. He said he'd probably telephone you about midday."

"I see. Wait a minute! I must think."

Silence.

"Listen, Celia! What train are you catching?"

"I've been looking them up. I'd better go by the first one. I'm so worried I don't know what I'm doing."

"You'll want some money."

"I'd forgotten that. I'll look and see if I have any."

"No! I'll come over. Yes, I will. Then I can give you some money, and get you a taxi. And you must wear warm things. It's devilish cold. Mind you have some breakfast. It looks as if you'll be away some days, so you'd better send your people a card. What? No! that's all right. He said he would telephone at midday. I'll be back here hours before then. Now, is there anything else?"

"No . . . nothing really . . . nothing that matters."

"What is it?"

"It's only that I was seeing George this evening and I don't see how I can let him know, but that doesn't really matter——"

"I'll let George know. Yes, I will. You'd better get busy. I'll be over inside an hour. What? That's all right."

2

After seeing Celia off, Brent returned to the flat, then waited for Markham to telephone.

It was nearly one o'clock when the bell rang. He snatched up the receiver, then said:

"Brent."

"It's Dawes."

"Well?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid."

"What is it?"

"She's dead."

"God!"

"She never recovered consciousness. She died about eleven o'clock this morning."

"But—it's impossible! Celia says she was perfectly all right when she left town yesterday."

"She was perfectly all right at dinner last night. She started to dance—and collapsed."

"What's the doctor say?"

"He has to find out why she died. There'll be an autopsy—and an inquest—of course. The coroner has already been told. Fortunately, I knew a doctor in the village. There was one staying in the hotel, but he had to go back to town to-day. We thought' she'd fainted. Incidentally, it was rather hot in the ballroom. Anyhow,

the doctor arrived half an hour after she collapsed, but he couldn't get her round."

"I simply can't believe it. . . . How's Oliver taken it?"

"He's like a man in a trance. That's one reason why I've telephoned. No good counting on him to do anything. It's just as well Celia's here."

"What's your wife think?"

"It's knocked her out for the time being."

"Would you like me to come down?"

"There's more you can do your end, if you will."

"I'll do anything, of course."

"Thanks. The first job isn't pleasant. Someone has to tell Agatha—and I thought you could do that better than any one else."

"What does she know?"

"Markham telephoned her early this morning to tell her that Merle was ill. So she's prepared to some extent. All the same, I'm afraid it's going to be a shock."

"I'll go to Highgate."

"You sound a bit shaky. Sure you wouldn't like me to call you back later?"

"No, it's all right. This conversation seems like something in a dream to me. What else can I do?"

"Ring up Markham's lawyers and ask Mr. Fraser to come down here, will you?"

"Right!"

"The next thing is this. The doctor who will do the autopsy, and give evidence at the inquest, naturally knows nothing about Merle's medical history. Could you get hold of the doctor who attended her at Chelsea—and the one at Hove?"

"Yes, I've met both of them."

"Good! The idea is that they should send in statements about Merle's condition while they were attending her. Otherwise the coroner won't have the whole story. They'll have to send the statements immediately, of course, because the inquest will be very soon—possibly to-morrow afternoon."

"I'll telephone them to-day."

"Thanks. They are well-known doctors and, I suppose, the coroner ought to know that her mental condition was considered so serious that she had to have an attendant. What do you think?"

"It'll give perspective. I suppose it will all come out about her attempted suicide at Highgate years ago?"

"I'm afraid it will."

"That will upset Agatha, but there it is. Anything else?"

"One other thing. Could you make preliminary arrangements for the funeral? You'll be able to give actual date and time later. Markham suggests you go to Curtis—and they'd better send a man down as soon as possible."

"Very well. It's the Agatha job I don't like, but I dare say Daphne will be a help. All this means I'll be out a good deal. Does that matter?"

"I don't think so. There will be no more news till after the inquest."

"That's true. But surely I'd better speak to Oliver?"

"Just as you like, but I don't think it would do any good. He welcomed my ringing you up."

"Well, you're there, so you know. Someone will telephone me after the inquest, then?"

"Yes."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

3 •

Three days later. . . .

The telephone bell rang. Brent picked up the receiver, then gave his name.

A man started to talk, but it was some moments before Brent realised it was Markham. The voice had as little emotional quality as that of a radio announcer reading the weather report.

"Wait a minute, Oliver! I can't hear. That's better. Well, I tell you frankly, I don't know what to say to you about Merle."

"There's nothing to be said."

"I never dreamed it would end like this. Can you bear to talk about it?"

"Yes."

"What caused her death?"

"The doctor couldn't discover. He said he couldn't see why she shouldn't have lived for years."

"Who was the doctor?"

"Some one Dawes knew. A fellow called Vance."

"What line did the coroner take?"

"There were statements from the other doctors who had attended her. Both said her mental and nervous condition was very serious. One suggested that it was possible that the fall from that window, years ago in Highgate, might have had long-term results. The coroner's decision was death from sudden heart failure. But what does any of that matter? She's dead."

"I *can't* understand it, Oliver!"

"I can't understand it."

"Did you notice anything—at dinner on Saturday night?"

"She'd never looked better—and never so lovely. She was dressed in white and——"

"In—*white*?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I've never known her wear white in the whole of her life."

"What does it matter how she was dressed?"

"All right. So you noticed nothing at dinner?"

"She didn't talk. But then I didn't, and neither did Marjorie. Dawes did all the talking."

"It's a mystery."

"There's no good talking about it. There's only one thing I want—and it's the last thing I'll ever want."

"What's that?"

"To get away from this place."

"When do you come back?"

"To-night. You've made preliminary arrangements about the funeral and Curtis sent a man here. Shall I telephone them?"

"Yes. They can make final arrangements in a few hours. Tell me this:—Have you heard from Agatha?"

"Not yet."

"She took it badly. Very badly. Thank heaven, Daphne was there! I don't think she'll come to the funeral—and she won't hear of the boys coming. I telephoned the head master and asked him to tell them."

"They can all do what they like."

Pause. Then Brent asked:

"What's Marjorie Dawes think about Merle's death?"

"I've no idea. She went away directly after the inquest."

"Is Dawes still there?"

"Yes."

"And Celia?"

"Went back to-day. . . . I shall write and tell Yashvin she's dead. And that he killed her. I'll write that in a day or two. Make no mistake—that criminal killed her. She really died the day she got his letter. She'd nothing to live for. She practically told me so. Anyhow, there's no good talking. Is there anything else?"

"No. You'll let me know what you arrange with Curtis?"

"Yes. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

CHAPTER V

CELIA

I

THE DAY of the funeral.

Celia glanced round the sitting-room in order to make certain that everything necessary had been done. A large table, laden with bottles, glasses, pyramids of sandwiches, stood against the wall opposite the fireplace and it was this which chiefly claimed her attention. When she had satisfied herself that nothing had been forgotten, she looked at her watch.

Nearly three o'clock. They would not be back till about four-thirty, so she had plenty of time. She studied her reflection in a mirror, adjusted her hair, then a bell rang and she hurried to the front door.

"George!"

He took her in his arms, kissed her, then looked round the hall—noting everything, especially the baby grand.

"Oh George, it's marvellous that it's your half-day! It seems ages and ages since I saw you. I've so much to tell you, I shan't know where to begin."

"I've something to say to you too, but it'll keep."

"I never thought you'd come here."

"Nor me neither."

He followed her into the sitting-room, then examined the solid expensive furniture as if he intended to make an inventory.

"Blimey! Some of 'em know how to do it!"

He sat down gingerly in the armchair usually occupied by Markham, then gazed intently at Celia.

"You don't half look tired."

"I'm all right, but I'll never forget the last few days."

She hesitated, then went on:

"Soon after she died, I went to say good-bye to her. Oh George, I can't tell you how lovely she looked! I was scared before going into the room, but not when I stood at the foot of the bed. She was like a statue——"

"'Tain't right!"

"Like a statue. There wasn't a sound. Just her and me—and something else."

"What d'you mean—something else?"

"I could feel it. There I stood, scarcely breathing. You know how we say this is beautiful, and that is beautiful, and don't mean a thing? But this was different. Uncanny, it was."

"'Tain't right, I tell you!"

"Then something happened that never happened to me before. Standing there, looking at her, all of me began to pray. There weren't any words. Nothing like that. All of me began to pray."

"Letting a kid like you see dead 'uns!"

"I'll never forget praying like that. Never!"

After a silence, she went on:

"You've no idea what there's been to do. No time to sit down. And Mr. Markham all of a heap, as you might say. I've never been so sorry for any one as I am for him."

"Why not try thinking about yourself—just to see what it feels like?"

"And Mrs. Dawes was nearly as bad as he was. Directly the inquest was over, I help her pack and off she goes on her own."

"She's gone to the funeral to-day, hasn't she?"

"No. She's still away. Mrs. Joyce hasn't gone either."

"Well, who *has*, for God's sake!"

"He's gone, of course. And Mr. Brent and Miss Daphne. And Mr. Dawes and Mr. Wade."

"What about the kids?"

"They haven't gone. Mrs. Joyce wouldn't let 'em."

"And the bloke upstairs?"

"Mr. Green wouldn't go with them. He did behave

queer. Told them straight that he wasn't going with them. I'm taking some flowers to-morrow and he says he's coming with me."

"So you're going to the cemetery to-morrow, are you?"

"Must take her some violets, George."

"You'll do something for yourself one day—and drop dead with surprise."

"Never known any one carry on like Mr. Green. Says he'll go to the cemetery with me and no one else. I hope this east wind drops by to-morrow. He hasn't been well for weeks."

"I suppose you're going to start nursing him now, aren't you? I've never known a kid like you in all my born days! Others, others, others—that's all you think about!"

There was a long silence. Celia was sitting in Merle's armchair, gazing at George with a speculative expression.

Suddenly her lips began to twitch as if she were trying not to laugh.

"What's up?"

"Oh George, you do look funny sitting in that chair!"

"Dare say I do."

Silence.

"It's like being married, sitting here like this."

"Ah!"

Another silence.

"Wouldn't get furniture like this, George, on hire purchase."

"We're getting *no* furniture on hire purchase. See?"

Then he added with great deliberation:

"Only one I've any use for is Brent. He gives you money for your fare—he sees you off at the station—and he takes the trouble to tell me you had to go away. He's all right."

"Shan't see him for a bit. He's going abroad almost at once. He'd arranged to go before she died and he's going. Wonder if Mr. Markham will miss him?"

"I know someone he is going to miss."

"Who's that?"

"You!"

"What d'you mean?"

"What do I mean? D'you think I'm letting things go on like this?"

"But——"

"Never mind about but! Nice way you've been treated! As you never think about yourself, I've been doing a bit of thinking for you."

"No one's as kind as you are."

"Don't you start any of that! I know you—trying to get round me. You're going to listen."

He rose, then stood by the mantelpiece.

"Now, you get this, and get it good and proper. First, they have the luck to find a girl like you—and there are mighty few. Then your missis falls for a Hi-talian. Then what? She packs up and leaves the old man. And you start running between 'em. She tells you all *her* troubles. He tells you all *his* troubles. And, what's more, he gets you to sit along with him in the evenings."

"But, *George*——"

"Never mind about—but George. That's what you do—carry the troubles of both of 'em. But no extra money, mind you! Oh no! Not on your life! *She's* so fond of you. *He* needs you so badly. But no extra money! Not likely!"

After an impressive pause, he went on:

"They can make fools of themselves because they've got money. And they can go on making fools of themselves, month after month, because they've got money. But you don't get any extra. And; of course, you don't ask for anything extra. Oh no! Not you! I reckon you ought to have been paid piece-work rates. Anyhow, I'm going to tell you something, and it's this:—I'm *fed up* with rich people! See?"

Then, with even greater emphasis:

"Fed up with 'em! They think of one thing, only one, always—themselves! Did either of 'em care tuppence that a young girl was staying awake of nights, thinking how to help 'em? Did they hell! Did either of 'em think it wasn't too good for a child like you to keep listening to the goings-on of a lot of married people what ought to know better? Not likely! You was useful to *them*. That's all that mattered."

He indicated the room with a sweep of his hand.

"This is how *they* live. Did they ever see *your* home? Ever ask about it? Five kids your mother's had and she has to work for others as well as her own because the old man's had a lot of sickness. She's not had it soft. She's

never had no time to fall for a Hi-talian. Yes, you can laugh. D'you know what rich people do? They take, take, take! While you—just because you've a heart much too big for your little body—you give, give, give!"

"No one's as sweet and as kind as you are."

"Don't start none of that! And you stay where you are. No getting up, coming over here, putting your arms round me and telling me how nice I am. That's how you always get your own way. Yes, you do! I'm not having you go on grinding yourself to powder for rich idle people what do damn-all for you. And that's flat!"

She tried to speak, but he stopped her.

"That's how they've treated you. Then, when your missis dies, what does the old man do? Goes down for the count—and let's a kid like you go and look at dead 'uns. And that's not all. There's the bloke upstairs, who'll only go to the cemetery with you. I dare say he isn't well. He can afford a nurse, can't he? Now, d'you know what you're going to do?"

It was a moment before a round-eyed flabbergasted Celia could say:

"What?"

"You're going to give notice. Yes, you are! If you don't, I'll come here and give it for you. I've thought this over for weeks and my mind's made up. What! Let you knock yourself to pieces for people what live like this? Not likely!"

She rose, pushed him gently into his chair, then crouched at his feet.

"You know much more than I do, George. But this is what I think. You don't meet people for no reason. You and I didn't meet for nothing. And I didn't come here for nothing. Least, that's what I feel. So, if things go wrong with the people round you, you've got to help them. You've got to!"

"And how long have you been helping 'em? Anyway, she's dead, isn't she? Now, don't start telling me that the old man can't look after himself—that the housekeeper drinks and does nothing. He's plenty of money. He can get proper help if he takes the trouble, but he *won't* take the trouble as long as you do everything for him. And that's true too about the bloke upstairs. What's the idea? D'you want to run a day nursery for rich old men—or what is it?"

"You're lovely to me, George."

"I know all about that. And I know this too :—You're giving a month's notice."

"Not *to-day* !"

"'Course not ! I wouldn't ask you to do nothing that isn't right and proper. To-morrow, or the day after."

"You know best."

"Not often—but this time I'm right. 'Course, I'm right !"

He glanced at the clock.

"Here ! I'd better be going."

He rose, then looked at the laden table.

"Blimey ! Some of 'em know how to do it !"

He followed her into the hall, kissed her, then said :

"Wednesday. And no nonsense, mind !"

"As if I'd forget !"

2

Celia, wearing her warmest coat and a thick scarf, stood in Harry Green's sitting-room, regarding the old man apprehensively.

"It's bitter, I tell you ! There's an east wind fit to kill any one. It's mad for you to go out. Let me take the orchids with these."

She indicated a large bunch of violets on the table.

"No, no ! I'm going."

The quavering querulous voice was a notable contrast to hers.

"I'm going. You get my coat."

He rose with difficulty, then stood—a lean gaunt figure—swaying slightly, although one hand rested on the back of a chair.

"I don't know what to do with you. I don't, straight."

"What's it matter what happens to me ? I'm old. I'm done for. I've had enough."

"You're wicked. That's what's the matter with you."

"Every one I ever knew is dead." He indicated the many photographs on the walls. "All of them ! It's time I went too. I'm no good to any one."

"Yes, you are."

He peered at her with eyes that retained only the ghost of their former fervour, then repeated :

"No good to any one. Who'd miss me ?"

"I would. Yes, I would! Although you give me more trouble than enough."

"You! You're a pretty girl, with life before you. I'm an old man. Worn-out, done for, useless! Why should you miss me?"

She went nearer to him.

"You've done a lot for me. Told me about other countries—shown me photographs of foreign cities—talked about them—told me no end about all sorts of interesting people. You don't know how little I knew when I came here. Nothing, you might say. I had very little schooling. *You* wouldn't call it schooling. And yet you stand there and say I wouldn't miss you! That's a nice way to talk!"

He gazed at her for some moments, as if she were an apparition, then said slowly:

"You're the last of them. The last of the people I've liked. You're not only Celia—you're the end of humanity. You're the last of them and, upon my soul, I sometimes think you're the best of them."

Then he went on in the same shaky tone:

"Haven't you got that overcoat yet?"

"Going out on a day like this! You ought to be in bed."

"Old Jim will be here soon. Jim's is the only taxi I've ever been in. For years, he drove me in his hansom—then he started to drive a taxi. He's a good fellow, Jim. I'd like him to drive the hearse when I'm buried."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Jim drive the hearse—and you bring some violets."

"How you *dare* say such things, I can't think!"

"Old—worn-out—done for."

"Here's your coat, if you *will* go. But you're not to leave the taxi. You hear? You're to stay in the taxi and I'll take the flowers to her grave."

"Must say au revoir to Merle."

"They sent those orchids in a lovely box."

"What? Orchids? Oh, yes! Fifty years I've had orchids from that shop. More than fifty years."

She adjusted his scarf, then buttoned his overcoat.

"Never known any one with clothes like yours."

"Have the best. That's the only thing to do. Always have the best."

"You—and your 'always have the best!' Don't you

know that lots of people think themselves lucky to have any clothes at all?"

"It's not right. Every one should have the best. Only thing to do."

She studied him for some moments, then said slowly:

"It's funny to think you've never done any work."

"What's that? Work? Couldn't do any of that. No time."

"You have enjoyed yourself, haven't you?"

"I've had a fine life. I've loved beautiful women—seen most of the world—met interesting people—read some good books. Glad I was born when I was."

He muttered to himself, then said coherently:

"I ought to have been born earlier. And I ought to have died on August the fourth 1914. That was the time for a gentleman to die."

The telephone bell rang. Celia picked up the receiver and was informed that the taxi had arrived.

"Is that old Jim? He's always punctual. He's a gentleman. And he knows his London. It broke his heart when he had to give up the hansom and start a taxi. What? Gloves? God bless my soul! It's a strange business."

He broke off, then added:

"Here am I, going to Merle's grave. And I used to tell her how she'd come to mine. Queer! I suppose the good God knows what he's about—though I sometimes doubt it."

"Are you ever ashamed of yourself? No, you're not! And it's because you're always so posh. You're so posh that you can't help being tickled to death with yourself."

"I don't mind dying. Not a bit! I'm tired of being a cartoon of myself. It isn't fair. Keep looking in the glass and saying: 'Good God, what's that?' Where's that ebony cane? Ah! Old Jos Brigstock gave me this. He's been dead these twenty years. More."

"D'you know Jim's waiting?"

"Jim?"

"Yes—*Jim*! Who's always punctual."

"Always punctual—and always had to wait. I remember when Clarissa Raeburn was at the Gaiety——"

"You can tell me about Clarissa Raeburn in the taxi."

"I met her after the performance one night and Jim was there with his hansom. I gave him a fiver—and *she* drove me home. I can hear her laugh now. Such a lovely laugh."

Eventually she got him to the taxi.

It was a malevolent afternoon, with daggers of ice in the wind. Nevertheless, when they reached the cemetery, he insisted on going to the wreath-covered grave.

Celia began to cry. But the old man, leaning on his ebony cane, said in an almost resonant voice :

"It's Celia and Harry Green. We've come, Merle. She's brought you violets, and I've brought you orchids. God bless you, my dear ! God bless you !"

She hurried him back to the waiting taxi.

Directly they entered the flat, she said :

"You're to go to bed. D'you hear ? At once ! I'm going to get you a hot-water bottle, then you can have tea in bed."

"Hot buttered scones ?"

"You—and your hot buttered scones ! Only if you go to bed at once !"

He stood, gazing at her.

"You're the last of them. And the best of them."

CHAPTER VI

THE FLAT IN THE MEWS

DAWES was standing by the window of the little sitting-room, smoking a cigarette, looking at a void of drifting fog. The sound of unseen traffic was the only reminder that the familiar world still existed.

A few moments later, he crossed to the fireplace, put out his cigarette, then stood motionless, listening.

At last he heard a taxi draw up. Soon, the front door opened and he heard Marjorie thank the driver for bringing up her suitcases. Then she came slowly into the room.

"Here I am—but I'm not sure I'm staying."

"You don't look well."

"I'm not likely to."

She threw her hat on to the table, then glanced at him apprehensively. He was staring at the fire, his right foot resting on the little fender.

"If you really want to go into this," he began, but she interrupted :

"I certainly do ! All of it !"

"Then you'd better sit down. We'll begin at the beginning."

"It will be interesting to know what you call the beginning."

"It's a conversation we had some months ago, when I told you that the old game was up and that we should have to adjust. Perhaps you remember suggesting that we should throw our hand in and go to ground for a bit, but when I indicated what that would mean—a Brixton flat, guinea dresses, cheap restaurants, and so on—you changed your mind. You were right, of course. The only thing worth having nowadays is money. Anyhow, we decided to adjust."

"So you became a blackmailer. Or do you object to the word?"

"Not in the least. I'm not afraid of words. What I do find depressing is that directly people become moralists, they cease to be intelligent. But that's by the way."

Then he added:

"Let's start with Wade. I never knew that you had any particular affection for him."

"I haven't, but it was pretty tough to loose Dolores on him. What chance did he have?"

"There's one slogan, Marjorie, that always seems sound to me. It's this:—Loot the looters. I decided to loot Wade, who is a most successful looter. You never met a man called Wilkinson, did you? I thought not. Pity. He was deliberately ruined by Wade in a business deal. When I met Wilkinson, he was not an inspiring spectacle."

"It isn't only Wade. What about Oliver? You've had the screw on him for months."

"Well, it's off now."

She rose quickly, then went to him. It was some moments before she could say coherently:

"There's something you've *got* to tell me! Did you kill Merle?"

"You really are absurdly melodramatic. I certainly did not kill Merle. I arranged her death, of course, but that's quite a different thing."

She shrank back from him, but he took her wrists and gently forced her into an armchair.

"Perhaps you'll listen without interrupting. You'll be wasting time if you try to have a scene, because I never have scenes—as you ought to know by this time."

He lit a cigarette, then continued in the same impersonal tone :

"Directly Merle knew that Yashvin was through, she asked me to go to Hove. She told me she was going to commit suicide."

"Is that *true* ? "

"I don't lie to you. She was going to commit suicide by throwing herself out of a window."

"How do you know she meant what she said ? She was probably hysterical."

"It's usually hysterical people who jump out of windows. She'd done it once, as you know. Anyhow, she convinced me. And I don't think I'm particularly easy to convince. Incidentally, what motive would she have had for lying ? "

He paused, then went on :

"Do be intelligent. Ask some questions. Was it likely that Merle would be able to return to the old life with Markham ? Yashvin wasn't a man to her—he was a glimpse of the promised land. People like Merle believe in the promised land. She had to, because she was a romantic—and utterly miserable, like most romantics. She met Yashvin and was radiantly happy for months. That dream crashed. What was she to do ? Go back to Markham ? "

Again he paused, but, as she said nothing, he continued :

"How should Merle find the will-power necessary for a return to the mud-hut of Markham, after the collapse of her castle in Spain ? "

"*You* found the will-power to alter completely—after everything you cared about had been smashed to bits."

"We're talking about Merle. With her temperament, she had no choice. She could not return to her old way of life. I knew from the beginning it would end as it did."

"*You knew* ? From the beginning ? "

"Of course. It needed no clairvoyance to see that Yashvin would bear little resemblance to Merle's dream of him. And it wasn't likely that he'd uproot himself to please her. Any fool could see how it would end. The miracle is that it lasted as long as it did. Did you really imagine that the Merle who came back from Paris would ever be able to endure life with Oliver Markham ? I didn't. I told you, months ago, that Merle would need someone who was fond of her—scientifically."

He threw his cigarette into the fire, then continued :

"I made Merle see that a clumsy suicide would cause a lot of unnecessary suffering. I suggested an alternative."

"Vance!"

"Yes—Vance. As you know, Merle and I met frequently after she went back to Markham. Every detail was arranged at those meetings."

"Why did you choose the Atalanta Park Hotel?"

"It seemed—appropriate."

She rose swiftly, then went to him.

"You can explain everything, can't you? But here's something you won't find easy."

"What's that?"

"After Merle was dead, I told you she'd destroyed all the letters she'd had from Yashvin. She tore them up, soon after we arrived at the Atalanta on that Saturday. You told me *not* to mention that at the inquest."

"Well?"

"A week ago, you wrote suggesting that I should write to Oliver, telling him that Merle had destroyed all Yashvin's letters just before she died. You did *not* want me to tell the coroner that; but you *did* want me to tell Oliver. Why?"

"My dear girl, nothing could be simpler. If you'd told the coroner about those letters, everything about Yashvin would have come out at the inquest. Was there any point in having all that in the papers?"

"Why did you want me to tell Oliver?"

"Because I thought he might regard the destruction of those letters in a different light. By a fluke, I was right. Markham is convinced that Merle destroyed Yashvin's letters, just before her death, because she had seen through him—and did not want to possess anything that reminded her of him. In other words, Markham now has a complete illusion about Merle—and if you want to know how essential it is for a human being to have an illusion, I must refer you to Brent. He is most eloquent on the subject. It's a pity he's away."

He went to the table, mixed some drinks, then handed her one.

"I don't think, Marjorie, that there was the slightest need for this conversation, but, as you were determined to have it, we may as well discuss everything."

She remained standing, glass in hand, gazing at him.

As she continued to gaze at him, she seemed to see the

Dawes she had met at that night club years ago—the young officer, who had so passionately believed that the 1918 Armistice would usher in a new and a splendid world. The contrast between that fiery idealist and the frozen being facing her was so overwhelming that she exclaimed :

"God ! How you've altered ! What you were—when I met you ! And what you are—now !"

"Extraordinary, how you're always going back to the 1914 war. Why not look forward to the next one ?"

"You don't think there's going to be another !"

"Obviously. There will be another war—to make the world safe for Big Business."

"Most people don't think so."

She gave the names of a number of prominent persons who had recently given rosy pre-views of the future.

"Yes, Marjorie, they're all optimistic. But I find the optimism of very successful men slightly comic."

Then he added :

"Better sit down and have your drink. There are one or two odds and ends we'd better discuss."

He glanced at her, then continued :

"We may have to start thinking again before long. As you know, we spend a good deal of money, one way and another, and recent sources of supply are running dry."

"I don't understand."

"You don't ? Wade, for instance, is becoming quite domestic. He spends most evenings with his wife nowadays. Also, it would be repetitive to unchain Dolores again. Not that Wade's forgotten her—far from it. Incidentally, Dolores has an exaggerated idea of remuneration for her services, valuable as they undoubtedly are."

After a pause, he went on :

"As to Markham, there's no more to be forced from him. Surely you realise that ? Well, I'll put it this way :—I knew certain facts about Markham—facts which he was most anxious Merle should not know. Those facts have ceased to have blackmailing value, because Merle is dead."

"Then Merle's death *didn't* suit you ?"

"Certainly not. Do you think Markham cares tuppence now what is known about him ? My power over him came from Merle—and died with Merle. If you think her death suited me, I can assure you it didn't."

"You're an incredible person !"

"Don't let's wander off into side issues. This is a business talk."

"Well, if you're right, what's going to happen to us now?"

"We'll find something."

There was a long silence.

"Listen, Ralph! We can't go on living like this! We *can't*."

"What other way is there for us to live? For us—as we are? I'm not interested in theoretical plans for imaginary people."

She said nothing, so he went on:

"Don't think I'm sold on our present type of existence. All I mean is that we are what we are and, that being so, is there much choice?"

She remained silent.

"Well, there it is. We shall manage."

"One thing's certain, Ralph."

"Really? What's that?"

"Oliver will be through with us. And I don't blame him."

"Are you certain? He's pretty helpless—and he'll soon be alone."

"Why?"

"Celia's given notice."

"What on earth for?"

"Her young man insisted on it. She gave a month's notice about a fortnight ago. At the moment, Celia is very involved with old Harry Green, who is seriously ill—in fact, dangerously ill. Celia is the only person he'll have near him."

"Oliver can soon get someone else."

"He's lost grip. He doesn't care about anything. He was dazed enough before Merle's death, but, now, he's utterly apathetic about everything."

He went to the fireplace, lit a cigarette, then said:

"We'd better finish this question about Merle once for all. She's the one you're bothering about."

"Of course she is! She's the only woman I ever liked—and she's certainly the only one I ever trusted."

"Yes, I understand. Odd as it may seem, I was fond of her—in my way. And, as you know, I was always interested in her father. Anyhow, if you really want to know who killed Merle, I'll tell you."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"It's very obvious. Markham and Brent killed Merle between them."

"That sounds crazy to me!"

"Well, look at the facts. You saw the effect Yashvin had upon Merle. You know how utterly dependent she was on him. What did Markham and Brent do? They arranged things so that Merle was left with nothing. Not even memories. That's what they did. It took time, but they did it very thoroughly."

"What ought they to have done?"

"Merle was a child. They should have left her a rattle to play with. And I'm not being wise in retrospect. You remember when we were all talking about Yashvin at Markham's flat—and Merle suddenly came into the room, having just arrived from Paris? Before she appeared, I told Markham that his temperament created the whole problem. Remember?"

"Vaguely."

"As Merle came into the room, I was about to tell Markham that if he would allow an open friendship between Merle and Yashvin, everything would settle itself in time. But what did Markham do? He went to Brent. And Brent decided to arrange things so that Merle would be forced to realise that Yashvin had no proposition to make. He succeeded—and killed her."

"That sounds all right, but why didn't *you* tell Oliver—after Merle had gone to Chelsea—that the thing to do was for him to let Merle have a friendship with Yashvin?"

"You over-rate me, Marjorie. It's not easy to blackmail a man and, simultaneously, to give him advice on how to run his intimate emotional affairs."

"You could have told Brent."

"That's perfectly true, but he was committed to his policy of proving that Yashvin had no proposition to make. He'd converted Markham to that policy, and so he would have to stick to it."

"I thought you admired Brent?"

"I do, as a writer. He should have kept out of the Merle problem. He might have known that anything to which Markham agreed wouldn't be any good. The fact that he had to work with Markham, ought to have told him that he'd let Merle down. He should have known that it

would end as it did. He told me himself that he hadn't a guess what would happen if Merle returned to Markham. That was unintelligent."

"Does Brent think she died of heart failure?"

"I doubt it. My guess is that he doesn't know what to think."

"Tell me this:—Had Oliver ever heard of Vance before you called him in when Merle collapsed at the Atalanta?"

"Yes. That was one of my mistakes."

"Didn't he think it queer that Vance was staying in the village?"

"Probably. If he's capable of thought nowadays. You'll notice a big change in him—even since you saw him."

After a long silence, Marjorie said:

"What beats me is that Merle fell so flat for Yashvin. There wasn't anything very extraordinary about him."

"I don't think that's much to do with anything. It's what a person means to you that counts. What that person is in actuality, isn't important."

Again, there was silence, then she exclaimed:

"God! You took a risk, fixing that with Vance! A hell of a risk!"

"My dear girl, surely you should know that people like us have to take risks. Anyhow, we've said everything now, so I suggest we never refer to all this again. I never think of it."

"Well, I've certainly made one discovery."

"What's that?"

"You're a complete mystery to me."

"Every human being is a complete mystery. You really must have a talk to Brent when he comes back from Germany. He'll make quite a lot of things clear to you."

She was about to speak, but the telephone bell rang.

"Take that, Marjorie, will you? I've got to go out."

"Suppose it's Oliver?"

"That's not very likely, but, if it is, I'm sure he'd rather talk to you than to me."

He kissed her, then went out of the room.

Marjorie picked up the receiver.

CHAPTER VII

THREE MONTHS LATER

" CELIA ! "

" Mr. Brent ! "

" What incredible luck ! I only got back to England yesterday. You are the one person in London I want to see. And I run into you this morning in Baker Street ! It's unbelievable ! "

He looked at her more closely, noted that the features were a trifle less animated and the expression of the blue eyes more serious, then went on :

" I've a hundred things to ask you. It's a bit early, but let's have coffee together. "

As they walked along Baker Street, he told her that he had wandered about Germany, Austria, and Hungary for the last three months, not staying anywhere for more than a week. Markham never wrote letters, so he had had no news of any kind. Then he explained that he had managed to get his old flat for a few weeks and after that he would go to the country. He was down to his last shilling and would therefore have to start another book. He had not done any work for a year—almost to the day.

They entered a French shop, went along a little passage, fragrant with the luscious aroma of chocolate, then ascended a flight of stairs to a room which was empty at this early hour. He chose a table in the May sunshine, near the window, then said :

" This beats everything ! I was wondering how to get in touch with you without the others knowing. I'll tell you later why I don't want to run into any of them yet. "

A waitress appeared and he ordered coffee, then turned to Celia.

She had taken her gloves off and almost immediately Brent exclaimed :

" You're wearing a wedding ring ! "

" I've been married for two months. "

" Heavens ! To George ? "

" Of course it's George ! Who else would it be ? "

" I always check up. You didn't expect to be married so soon, did you ? "

"I didn't expect to be married till 1939—at the earliest. But Mr. Green died——"

"When?"

"Very soon after you went away. I nursed him for a fortnight. I was with him when he died."

Seeing that she was disturbed, he asked quickly:

"What happened to Markham while you were nursing Green?"

"He managed somehow. He went out to meals. Anyway, I'd given notice. George made me give notice. And was he furious when I looked after Mr. Green! We nearly had a row. We did, really! Mr. Green had been very kind to me. You've no idea how kind. It's owing to him that we were able to marry."

"He left you some money?"

"Five hundred pounds."

She repeated the words, as if she were still unable to believe in the reality of the amount they represented.

Then she told him how all sorts of people had come to Harry Green's funeral—old women, who had once been dressers at theatres, and a taxi driver, called Jim, who had known Green for years and years. Jim had told her it was Green who had paid for him to learn to drive a car, when he gave up his hansom, and that Green had bought him a taxi.

She ended by saying:

"You don't know how good he was. I'll never forget him. I couldn't if I tried, because all our furniture was bought with his money. My mother says she's never seen such furniture. Keeps asking if I'm a duchess. All I know is that, as George doesn't hold with hire purchase, it would have been years before we could have bought *any* furniture—and then heaven knows what it would have been like!"

She explained how Green's lawyer had advanced the legacy without waiting to get probate, because George was determined to get married at once—although she didn't think it decent to marry so soon after Mr. Green's death. But George had said that he'd had enough of her being in service—that he was sick and tired of her "having to do with dead 'uns"—and that he wanted to marry a girl, not an undertaker. So she had given in—though she didn't think it right—and never would think it right.

"You know, Mr. Brent, I still can't believe what's happened to me. I never thought to have such lovely

things. You knew Mrs. Markham left me her opal ring ? ”

“ No, I didn’t. How I remember that ring ! Her father gave it to her, years ago. ”

“ I don’t wear it, of course. I’d be too scared of losing it. But I look at it—often. Oh, it’s marvellous ! Never the same ! It is lovely. I can’t believe it’s mine. She left me some clothes too—wonderful clothes. My mother says I ought to open a shop. So much has happened in just over a year that I feel like a different person. I’ve not really got used to being married yet. ”

“ And how is George ? ”

“ Oh, he’s all right ! Very kind. But I’ll tell you one thing :—It takes a long time for George to get anything into his head, but, once in, you *can’t* move it ! ”

“ Well, there it is, Celia. George weighs things up. Still, I’m not surprised he got a bit tired of all you were let in for by the Markhams. It wasn’t easy for you. But, what I want to know is—how does Markham get on without you ? And what’s he like nowadays ? ”

After a pause, she replied :

“ He isn’t anything, as you might say. It’s difficult to explain. He’s not unhappy. He’s bewildered—like you are when you wake from a bad dream. ”

“ Do you ever see him ? ”

“ Oh yes, nearly every other day. I have a key to the flat and often run in. He seems to want me to. Can you believe that ? ”

“ Easily. ”

“ We live in Pimlico, so it isn’t far. I go in sometimes in the afternoon for an hour and do some sewing. He’s nearly always alone in the afternoon. He doesn’t go out a lot. And he doesn’t say much. Sometimes sits silent for nearly an hour, then suddenly says something half to himself. ”

“ What sort of things ? ”

“ Queer, some of them. One afternoon, after saying nothing for a long time, he suddenly said : ‘ She destroyed all his letters—just before she died. ’ Lor ! Did I jump ! ”

“ But *did* she destroy Yashvin’s letters—just before she died ? ”

“ That’s what he said. ”

“ It’s news to me. ”

After a silence, Brent asked :

“ Does Wade ever come to see him ? ”

"Not often. He's gone back to his wife. He's not half as lively as he used to be and doesn't fancy himself so much. Mind you, he used to be a bit too lively at times. He'd got a nerve!"

"But who looks after Markham now you've gone? Has he a proper housekeeper nowadays?"

"No, and the old one left when I did. You see, I went awfully suddenly, because of George. He wouldn't even let me stay for my month. I did feel bad about that, but you can't argue with George. So, the day I went, Mr. Markham telephoned Mrs. Dawes and asked her to come for the weekend."

"Did she?"

"They both came. And they're still there."

"What?"

"They're still there, though I don't suppose it's for good. But, in his state, he had to have someone quickly when I left—and he could only think of Mrs. Dawes. And she certainly runs things marvellously, although she's so restless that she can't keep still for a moment. She's kind to him—I will say that—but she's on the move all the time."

"What about Dawes?"

"He's just the same."

"Listen, Celia! I've often meant to ask you:—What do *you* make of Dawes?"

"Always very nice to me. Nothing upsets *him*. Never seen any one so cool. But I'll tell you something he said that made me feel queer. Don't ask me why, because I don't know."

"What was it?"

"One afternoon I went to see Mr. Markham before going to the cemetery to take her some flowers. As I was leaving, I met Mr. Dawes in the hall. I told him what I was going to do, and he gave me a pound, and asked me to take some flowers for him. Then he said: 'I'm the only one who understood Merle.' Said it in that careless way of his—but it did make me feel funny inside. Don't know why—but it did."

"He's the oddest man I've ever met. Anyway, it's difficult to imagine the three of them in that flat, but of course it won't last."

He made her have more coffee, then lit a cigarette and said: "What's happened to Agatha and Daphne?"

"You wouldn't know them. They've left that Highgate flat. Mr. Markham took a house for them—and the boys go there for the holidays. They're happy as anything. All they think about is how to give the boys a good time. You'll be surprised when you see them."

"Is he going to send the boys to Eton?"

"No, that's off. D'you know what he reminds me of?"

"What?"

"I once went for a holiday to North Devon. Hartland, the place was. There was a ship near the Point, wrecked on the rocks. The waves were slowly breaking it up. Well, sometimes he reminds me of that ship. But, you know, you can't help being fond of him. I didn't like him before the trouble started, but I do now."

"I know what you mean. Does Agatha or Daphne ever go to see him?"

"Mrs. Joyce goes very seldom, but Miss Daphne goes a lot. Every week, almost."

There was a long silence. Then Celia suddenly asked:

"Do you think she knew she was going to die?"

"What on earth made you ask that?"

"About a month ago, I woke in the night—and was *certain* she knew she was going to die. That's why I jumped so when he said she'd destroyed those letters."

"Now I'll ask you something. Did you ever know her dress in white?"

"Never. Why?"

"Because she was dressed in white when she collapsed at that hotel."

"Then *you* think she knew she was going to die?"

"I think it's possible. She was very psychic. She didn't have those eyes for nothing. Anyhow, I don't think it's coincidence she destroyed those letters and dressed in white on that Saturday."

Again, there was a long silence.

Then Celia said, as if she were thinking aloud:

"Don't queer things happen to people?"

"Very queer."

After a pause, she asked:

"Has your life been what you thought it would be?"

"Anything but!"

"Better or worse?"

"Better and worse."

He put his cigarette out, then said :

"I've another question for you, but I don't suppose you'll be able to answer it. When Markham telephoned me from the Atalanta, he said he was going to write to Yashvin and tell him that Merle was dead. Do you know if he did write?"

"Yes, he wrote. But the letter was returned."

"Returned! Why? Every one in Verna knew Yashvin."

"Well, back it came. The envelope was marked 'Unknown.' Mr. Markham couldn't believe it no more than you can, but he was determined to find out something—so he had enquiries made. He only had a report about three weeks ago. It said that—soon after you came back from Verna—Yashvin quarrelled with his partner. Then he disappeared. He owes money to most of the hotels and all over the place. Plenty of people are trying to find him."

"So that's the end of Boris Yashvin."

But directly he had said the words he doubted whether Yashvin had gone under finally. He'd get going again—possibly under another name—but he'd get going. Probably he'd decided to cut other people's losses.

"Listen, Celia! There are one or two things before we go. The first is that I'd like to see you and George—and your home. So don't ask me to supper, if you don't want me."

"You'd come? Really?"

"Of course! Any day next week."

"Make it Wednesday, will you?"

"Wednesday it is. Will you give me the address?"

He made a note of her address, then said :

"Now, I don't want you to tell any one you've seen me. I don't think there's any point in my meeting them. Anyway, not yet. For one thing, I've got to work. There's no doubt about that. Do *you* think he'd like to see me?"

"It's difficult to say. You'd remind him of it all, wouldn't you?"

"That's certain. I shall leave it for the time being."

He paid the bill, then turned to her and said :

"Do you know you've altered a little? You're more serious."

"I've a lot to think about. I may have a child before so very long—and you have to make plans, don't you?"

"One makes them."

"And yet I often wonder if it's any good. I expect Mr. Markham made plenty of plans when he was young."

"I'm quite sure he did."

They went down to the street.

"I'll see you on Wednesday."

"Yes. George will be glad. He likes you."

"Good! And I like George. It's going to be hot, Celia. There isn't a breath."

He left her, then walked slowly towards his flat.

When he reached the study, he glanced at the typewriter—ready for work on the table—as he crossed to the window. He gazed at the little white statue in the middle of the courtyard; at the motionless laburnum; at a solitary cloud in a serene sky.

At last he went to a cupboard, took out a pile of paper which he put on the table, then inserted a sheet in the typewriter.

He was about to return to the window when—suddenly—Merle overshadowed him. She had returned, as the dead do return, not visibly, but in the form of overwhelming presence.

Then, word by word, he remembered their last conversation at Hove.

"Do something for me, when you get back to town, will you?"

"Of course. Anything."

"Telephone Dawes and ask him to come to see me."

"Dawes!"

"Yes. Why not?"

"But you haven't seen him for months and months."

"Perhaps that's why I want to see him now. Tell him, will you?"

"All right. But——"

"I want to be alone."

"Yes, of course. . . ."

He began to pace slowly up and down.

She had committed suicide. That was certain. He didn't care what the medical evidence had been at the inquest. Some doctor Dawes had called in from the village!

Dawes!

No, that was absurd! Grotesque! He'd never take

the risk! Besides, what had Dawes to get from Merle's death? To stay with Oliver for a few weeks? No. But there was a mystery somewhere. A hell of a mystery!

It was odd that Dawes had said he was the only one who understood Merle. What could that mean? They were farther apart than the poles.

Brent came to a standstill, stood staring at the carpet.

She still overshadowed him. She was still more real than anything in the room.

But, eventually, the knowledge of his own position asserted itself. He must work! He had given months and months to Merle and Oliver. He *must* work.

Several minutes passed, but he did not move.

Then, swift and revealing as lightning, an idea illumined his mind.

He forgot time, place—everything.

For two years he had been haunted by the nature of illusion—by the necessity for illusion. Two years ago, he had experienced inner collapse through the fading of the dream which had lit his world with magic. He had just realised the full extent of that collapse when Oliver had come to this very room, a year ago.

Since then, by a miracle, he had seen how an illusion had transformed Merle. Transformed her so wholly that, having glimpsed life in spiritual perspective, she had been unable to return to darkness. He had seen everything he had thought, felt, and known about illusion exemplified in the triumph and the tragedy of Merle.

Here was the theme for a book. A theme that was his by right of conquest. A theme that was not a theory, but one rooted in lived reality.

The book would not be a photographic record of what had happened to Merle. Actual events would provide a spring-board for imagination. He could give this book everything he had experienced in the two most crucial years of his life.

A great surge of enthusiasm swept over him.

He crossed to the table, sat down, then began to make notes.

An hour passed—another hour passed—but he continued to type rapidly.

THE END

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